The Enigma of Arrival:

The Politics and Poetics of Caribbean Migration to Britain

In 1948, a cohort of 492 migrants from the Caribbean arrived at Tilbury Docks in Essex on the HMT Empire Windrush. On the 70th anniversary of this landmark event, which should have been a major moment of national celebration and commemoration, there was instead controversy amongst British communities.

Despite being granted British citizenship on arrival, it was revealed in 2018 that many individuals of Caribbean descent faced deportation. An unknown number of people were detained, lost their jobs or homes, or were denied benefits or medical care to which they were entitled. In response, a petition signed by over 160,000 people was brought to the British government to demand change in relation to official policy.

This travelling exhibition takes its title from V.S. Naipaul's 1987 novel, 'The Enigma of Arrival': a commentary on a key moment in Caribbean Migration to Britain and the memory of its impact and aftermath. The novel charts the experience of West Indian migrants to the United Kingdom, how they arrived and settled, the problems they encountered and the solutions they sought. It ends with the build-up to the detainments and deportations of some of these individuals and their families, seventy or so years later.

The HMT Empire Windrush was one of the most famous ships that transported groups of Caribbean people to Britain. However, it was by no means the only vessel: ships came both before and after, and people also travelled by train and plane. The term "Windrush" has come to represent the broader movements of this period and the subsequent political disaster that followed in its wake.



This exhibition has been produced by the University of the West Indies and facilitated by the Barbados Museum & Historical Society. It is the result of contributions by the Diasporic Community on both sides of the Atlantic and the generous support provided by EU-LAC Museums. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 693669. The original, expanded panels are accessible through the Virtual Museum of Caribbean Migration and Memory developed by Open Virtual Worlds, University of St Andrews. This new iteration of the exhibition has been made possible through the generous funding of the Scottish Funding Council, St Andrews Restarting Research Funding Scheme (SARRF).

















Migratory Motivations



Between 1948 and 1964 an estimated 300,000 people from the Caribbean travelled to Britain, many of them at the invitation of the British Government.

The 1948 Nationality Act conferred the status of "Citizen of the United Kingdom and its Colonies" on the migrants, giving them the right to enter freely. This cultural heritage and legal status distinguished Britain from earlier migrant destinations.

People from the Caribbean made the choice to migrate to Britain for a variety of reasons, including:

- Caribbean service at the end of World War II and the need for workers to help with the post-war reconstruction of Britain.
- Limited employment in the Caribbean following the second world war.
- Government schemes in the Caribbean to sponsor workers in state-aided migration.





Most Caribbean people knew about Britain through British newspapers and radio programmes that were broadcast throughout the West Indies.

The notion of Britain as a "Mother Country" was also disseminated through the education and social system, which mirrored that of Britain. This included adopting the national flag, anthem, Christian religion, cricket, literature, national holidays, and revering the Royal Family.

These first impressions, indoctrinated at a young age, gave an idealistic view of Britain as a welcoming "home" for a family of nations.

Migrants usually travelled on a British/Colonial passport. The journey could last as much as 4 weeks.





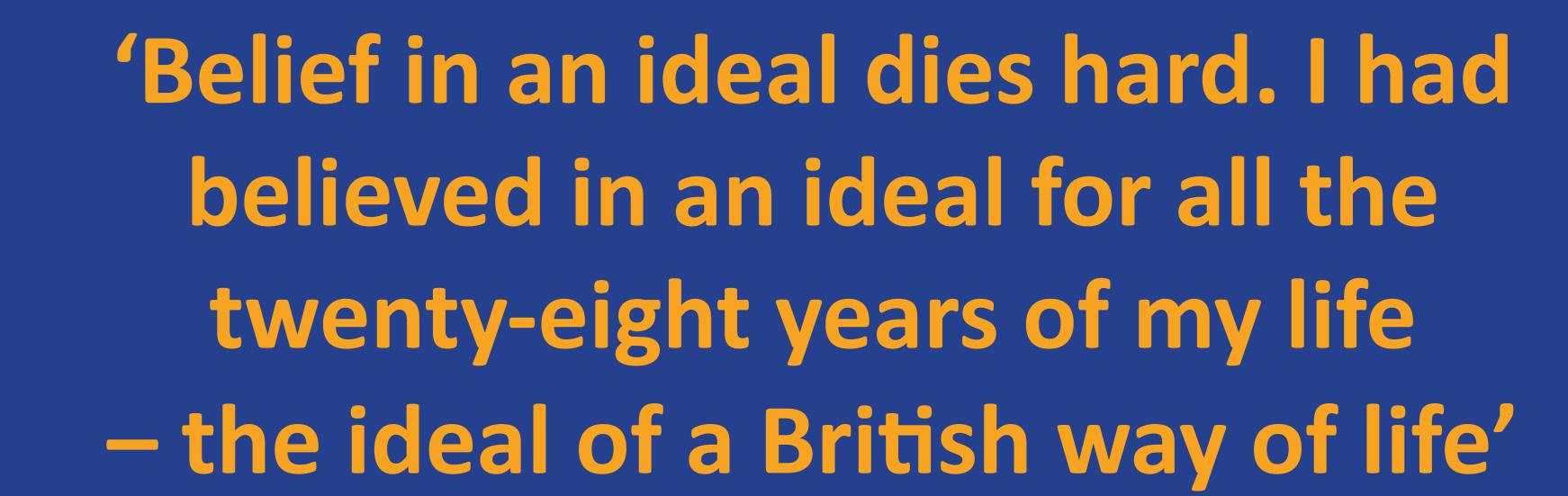
Despite the media buzz around the arrival of the Windrush, Caribbean migrants experienced ignorance, hostility, and racism from those who viewed them as unwelcome threats to the stability of Britain.

In addition to the drastic change in climate for which they were unprepared, a large number of the inner cities were still devastated by wartime bombing and there was a critical shortage of housing and many boarding houses would not accept Black people from the Caribbean.

The pristine surroundings they were expecting had been replaced with dirty buildings and streets. The cultural differences were so vast, and expectations so shattered, that some people were not sure that they had arrived in the right place.

'It was rough the first few years because it was hard to find rooms. There were rooms that were vacant but you would see signs that said "No Blacks", "No Coloureds", "No Irish". Or you might see "English Only"

Roy Campbell, Oral History, BMHS



'To Sir, With Love', E.R. Braithwaite

For those who had moved after receiving letters from family and friends providing positive and beautiful impressions of Britain, shock and disappointment arose from the challenges they faced in finding employment and accommodation.

Many of the migrants were skilled and professional workers such as carpenters, motor mechanics, dressmakers, teachers, and engineers.

Due to racism and discrimination, few were employed in those capacities and had to take on work in factories, building sites, hotels, restaurants, and transport. Many women were recruited by the National Health Service to train as nurses. A large number of Caribbean people, however, found themselves having to work as porters and street cleaners. These services were vital but poorly paid.





Home-Making

Caribbean migrants built their own housing strategies and social networks to deal with discrimination and racism. Some of these started out of kinship or family relationships, where siblings and cousins came together to support each other. In time, they began to buy properties which they could then rent out to other Caribbean people. It was, however, often difficult for West Indians to raise mortgages, so they raised the funds through collective saving systems such as 'meeting turns' and 'partners'.

Despite discrimination in personal relationships, housing, and employment, large multiracial communities developed in the inner cities of London, Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Reading, and elsewhere. Notably, Brixton in South London emerged as an early multiracial community. This could have been due to the fact that original migrants from the "Windrush Generation" had been temporarily housed in an empty air-raid shelter in Clapham and reported to the nearest Labour Exchange in Brixton.

'I did not dare to dream that it would one day be that I that would go to England. It would one day be I that would sail on a ship as big as a world and feel the sun's heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing'

'Small Island', Andrea Levy



Politics





Initially, Caribbean leaders responded positively to the call for migration to Britain because of economic advantages.

Pressures increased in Great Britain to control immigration from the "new" Commonwealth, not only from the Caribbean but also from the Indian subcontinent. This tension resulted in the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, designed to regulate the flow of migrants to Britain. Political leaders in the Caribbean then recognised that the open and free period of immigration was ending.

The West Indies Federation, under the leadership of Sir Grantley Adams, felt it necessary to take overt steps to engage and negotiate with British politicians. They also supported activist efforts in Britain against increasingly racist policies which made Caribbean migrants' British citizenship vulnerable.

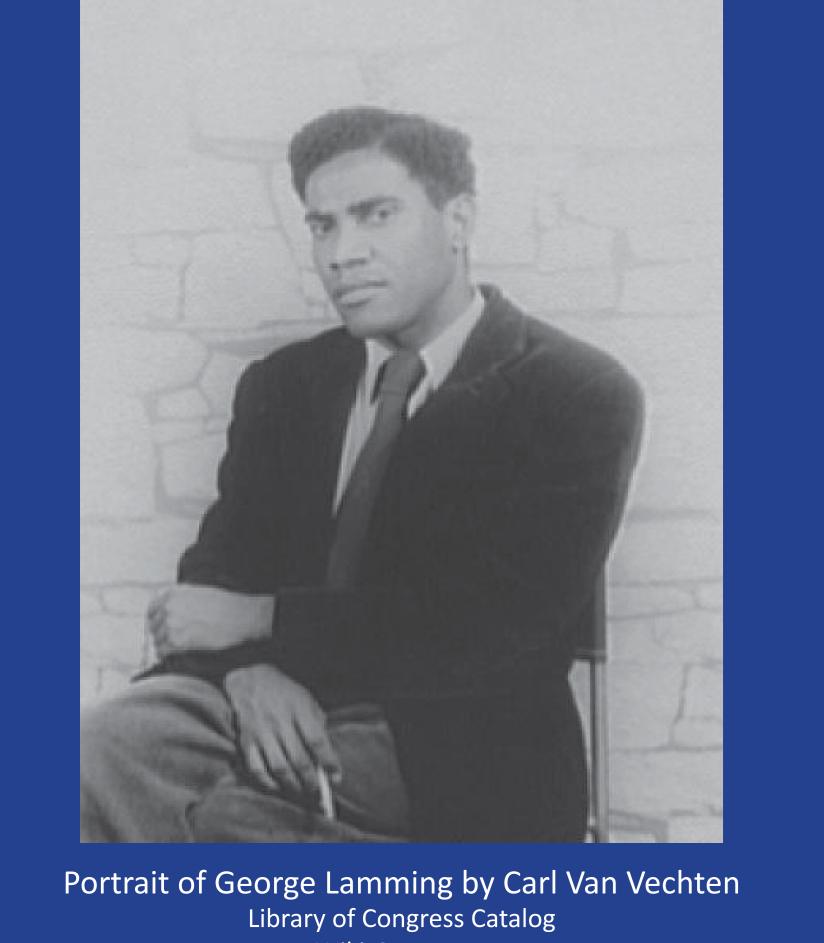
The 1971 Immigration Act and the 1981 British Nationality Act saw even more restrictions placed on Commonwealth citizens and redefined British citizenship. Citizenship was no longer based on imperial ties to Britain, which had extended to all citizens of the Commonwealth. Instead, only those born in Britain, or the descendants of those born in Britain, could claim to be British.

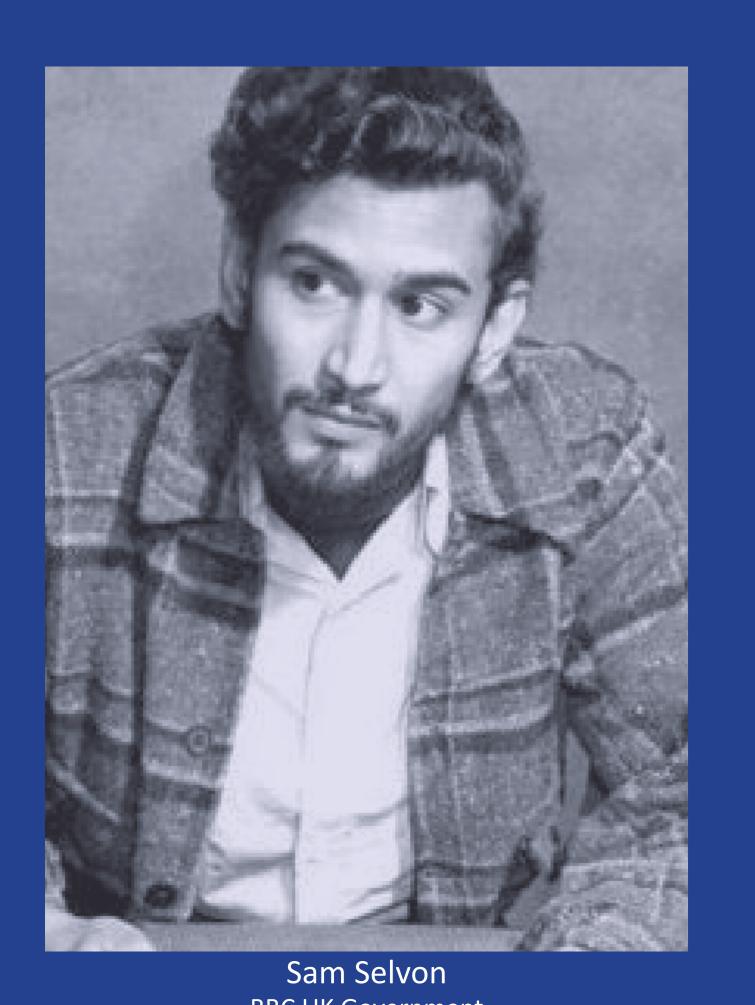
This legislation would have a lasting impact on many immigrants and their descendants who would one day awaken to find themselves abandoned and without a country to call home.











Wiki-Commons

So many migrants could not have settled within Britain without making an impact on British society.

Writers such as Samuel Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, and George Lamming migrated and became published authors documenting the colonial experiences of black and brown people. Their work was heard in the Caribbean through the influential radio programme Caribbean Voices, broadcast by the BBC between 1943 and 1958, which encouraged other West Indians to write distinctively Caribbean prose and poetry.

Contemporary poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Louise Bennett-Coverley, and Caribbean-heritage novelists such as Andrea Levy, Kei Miller, Caryl Phillips, Zadie Smith, and Bernardine Evaristo, published and performed within urban cultural spaces.

The Caribbean Artists Movement (1966-1972) was another significant contribution to British arts. Visual artists participating in this movement included Paul Dash, Cecil Baugh, Aubrey Williams, and Althea McNish.

In 1958, white provocation led to riots in Notting Hill, in London, and in Nottingham, culminating in the murder of young Antiguan Kelso Cochrane the following year.

One response, led by Trinidadian journalist Claudia Jones among others, was to organise a carnival to celebrate Caribbean culture in the face of such hostility and assert a positive Caribbean presence. The Notting Hill Carnival is now the largest such carnival in Europe.

Although not all British people welcomed the Windrush Generation, they readily embraced its cultural influences and the impact of Caribbean sporting heroes. From calypso to carnival, many took advantage of the increasingly diverse array of music, food, and cultural life brought about by these movements and exchanges.









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In 2010, the then Home Secretary Theresa May launched her "hostile environment,"

a vote-winning policy to curb the entry into Britain of what were termed "bogus asylum seekers" and "illegal immigrants." Under the policy, anyone suspected of being an illegal immigrant had to prove their legal right to remain, or, for those born in Britain, the legal right of their parents to remain. These rights predated the 1971 legislation for Caribbean and other 'new' Commonwealth peoples.

The Immigration Act of 2014 introduced immigration checks which caused many Commonwealth immigrants of Caribbean descent to be categorised as illegal even after years of living, working, and paying taxes in Britain.

A clause from the 1999 Immigration and Asylum legislation provided long-standing Commonwealth residents with protection from enforced removal, but this was deleted from the 2014 Immigration Act. There has been no attempt to reinstate the clause in order to solve the resulting problems, and deportations to the Caribbean continue today. Those affected by this Act lost their jobs, homes, and the ability to collect benefits and access healthcare. Many people have been forcibly deported back to countries that they have not seen or lived in for decades. Forcible deportation has caused families to be broken up and other immigrants to live in fear of possible expulsion.

Since the Home Office did not keep proper records, or the records that they had were destroyed, it has been difficult for immigrants from the Windrush Generation to prove that they are in Britain legally. In order to prove their "right to remain," individuals have been required to provide four pieces of evidence for each year of residency.



'My children will always carry the legacy of Windrush, but they and their peers are already redefining what that means in a new century. They aren't so much chameleons, changing coats to suit the surroundings, as creatures whose coats of many hues allow those confident enough to do so to move around with greater ease than we could [...] Windrush is a cloak they wear as they choose, not the straitjacket it could be for my generation.

Caribritish: me, my family and the legacy of Windrush.'

Hugh Muir, Journalist and Windrush Descendant The Guardian, 7 June 2018



Descendants of the Windrush migrants continue to live in Britain contributing to British society, economy, and culture but increasingly find their citizenship, security, and identity threatened. The remnants of political policy from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as new policies driven by ever-increasing nationalism within present day Britain, place continued pressure on their livelihood.



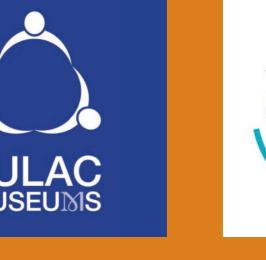


















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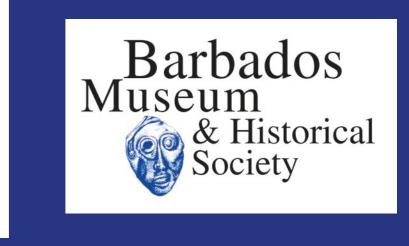














Oral Histories

Mr Roy Campbell Rev Buddy Larrier Ms Hedda Phillips-Boyce

Review and Editing

Ms Lorna Abungu Ms Debra Barnes-Tabora Dr Mary Chamberlain Dr Suzanne Francis-Brown Rev Guy Hewitt Dr Lennox Honychurch Dr Tara Inniss-Gibbs Dr Sherene James-Williamson Dr Karen Brown Dr Ana Sol González Dr Kate Keohane Dr Calum McAndrew Ms Francesca Fotheringham Ms Sarah Takhar Ms Leonie Leeder Ms Madison Kuras Ms Kate Wilson Ms Mattea Gernentz Ms Aïda Ndiaye Ms Ananya Jain Ms Akshika Kandage Ms Priya Purdy St Andrews BAME Network





