

# Windrush echoes

On 22 June 1948 the *Empire Windrush* ended its journey from Jamaica by docking at Tilbury and ushering forth 492 people from the Caribbean - most were men, one was a boy of thirteen, and there were no more than twelve women. This event has come to symbolise a process which would transform Britain from its supposed cultural and racial homogeneity into a multi-cultural/multi-racial society. It was to mark the beginning of a long, uneven and contradictory process,

'Still today, less provable, but no less endemic or unjust, forms of discrimination afflict the lives of too many people. In too many walks of life, from Whitehall and the City downward, the glass ceiling is still firmly in place. From personal experience, I know that little more than a decade ago police officers and other Palace of Westminster staff could not believe that an Asian had been elected as an honourable member.' KEITH VAZ, MP

in which the UK's long imperial history was to come 'home' in the embodied presence of those who had previously been seen - almost exclusively - solely in pictorial or imaginary form. It was the moment when the meaning of empire for millions of Britons ('host' and 'stranger'/'indigenous' and 'immigrant') began to take on a different reality, as the cauldron of encounter shifted from 'there' to 'here'; it was the beginning of a transformatory process in which

African, Asian and Caribbean migrants - and generations of their descendants - were to construct new narratives of home, new belongings, upon, and alongside, old ones. Of course 1948 does not mark the first presence of people from the Caribbean, Asia, Africa and the Arab world in the UK, as the long-established

multi-racial populations of many of the port cities attest. Nor is it the first moment of undoing of a previously culturally homogeneous nation. One only has to remember those groups who had long been in, but never fully encompassed by the national self-image - the Irish and Jewish. To interpret *Windrush* as signalling a beginning in any simple sense is thus only to repeat a series of well established inaccuracies and erasures - inaccuracies and erasures which have been belied in recent years by historical work on black presence in parts of the (ever expanding) Kingdom since at least the late eighteenth century (if not as far back as Elizabethan times).

Despite the erasures and historical inaccuracies which result from the equation of the arrival of the *Windrush* with that of the moment of first arrival of people from the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, June 1948 does stand for something particular. Of course there is the issue of numerical scale. This date was to mark the beginning of a *mass and permanent* presence of British subjects of a different colour. But there is more to it than this. The presence of diverse

'Yet, we also need to look at the positive side. The Asian community is at the centre of national economic life. We may be told that 'there ain't no black in the Union Jack', but on the football field or the athletics track, there is no lack of brilliant black sportsmen and women proud and overjoyed to play for and represent their country. A sentiment that is heartily reciprocated ... The passengers on the *Windrush* were on a voyage of discovery in more ways than one. They were pioneers in the recreation of a diverse, youthful and cosmopolitan nation, whose best days are yet to come.' KEITH VAZ, MP

peoples from the erstwhile empire was to be at the core of the shifting configurations of 'the nation' and national identity which have been so central in the last four or five decades. When those 492 *British subjects*, many of whom were returned soldiers from the second world war, walked down the gangplanks, they asserted their rights to reside in the 'mother country' and share in its fortunes. Formally the terms of empire gave them every right to do so, but the spatial, social and cultural ordering of empire not did so easily admit of this right. The dis-ease which was to accompany the presence of the 'empire at home' was eventually to reverberate across the national horizon as the process of migration was to widen and deepen into one of multiple immigrations, and

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people from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia put down roots across the country. As an iconic moment, then, *The Empire Windrush* is to be seen as representing those multiple diaspora which have helped to change the social, political and cultural topography of the United Kingdom.

But the direction of this changed landscape has been neither linear nor settled. For example, a criminal justice system which allows perpetrators of

I have been trying to put my mind to what people mean when they say they are British, or that there is a British identity, or that there is a British culture. If indeed there is one, then I must confess that I find it extremely exclusive. There has always been a tremendous diversity within what was perceived to be British, even before the new migration from the Commonwealth - there are clearly very distinct ... identities of Scots, Irish and Welsh ... and even with England there are distinct regional identities ... It is therefore extremely difficult to work out what is considered to be essentially the Britishness of the British. I fear it may have referred to the middle and upper classes from the south of England who have exerted far more influence than those from other parts of the country. They are also the ones who have influenced the image of the British Empire.' BARONESS FLAHER

racist violence and even murder, as in the cases of Stephen Lawrence and Michael Menson, to go undetected and unpunished can persist alongside - even within - a wider socio-cultural environment in which the pains, losses and disgusts of Doreen and Neville Lawrence are embraced and understood as part of a national tragedy.' Black athletes and cricketers can be applauded as the finest of the nation at the same time as that nation is depicted in, for example, government white papers on social policy, as almost wholly white and culturally homogenous. Official social

and economic data can suggest a profound unevenness in the fortunes of members of what have become 'ethnic minority communities', such that a wider dispersal across all fields of economic and employment opportunity for some, co-exists with persistent un/

This is illustrated by Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party Conference in September 1998.

under and low paid employment for others.

Within and against these uneven and contradictory processes, diverse populations of African, Asian and Caribbean settlers, and generations of their descendents, have crafted their lives and loves; their families and communities. If these were at times achieved against the odds, it was from these bases that they contributed the economic, political and cultural labours around which what it meant to be 'British' was

to be reconfigured. And if the process of reconfiguration struck at the core of what it meant to be white, so too it struck at the core of what it meant to be black, or Asian, or African, or Caribbean. For while white people have been dealt the challenge of facing the destabilisations of what may, in the first fifty years of the century, have felt like psychic and cultural certainties, black people have had to face challenges to their own certainties

'Everything becomes a great deal more complex when we consider the situation of the British-born Asians. Very often the advice at home is 'keep your head below the parapet and concentrate on education, economic success and security'. Is that really going to be sufficient for the new generation? Is that really what it is all about? What about a voice in society? What about being opinion formers?... Six per cent of a very diverse minority population should not be looking for power on the basis of ethnic origin ... that would be as biased as the white majority holding on to it as it is now. But we do need to share in the decision making. And to make sure that whatever such decisions are being taken we are also there to speak for ourselves.' BARONESS FLATHER

which have been born of the arrival of the 'black Briton, and the claims to both the nation and a redefined blackness which this term carries. In this way each of us has been touched by the changes which have been ushered in since June 1948. And it is the pervasive and permanent and unsettled force of these transformations that we have tried to reflect in this special issue of *Soundings*-

The contradictions and tensions which have emerged in the wake of a more diverse and heterogeneous United Kingdom are reflected in each of the contributions which follow. Covering a wide array of issues, and taking many different forms, the pieces also reflect the unsettled and contingent character of contemporary negotiations around 'race', national identity and cultural and

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political belonging. Ann Phoenix brings these issues to life in her consideration of the shifting boundaries of belonging which young people construct and inhabit.

'A defining "moment" was definitely Enoch Powell's speeches, because almost from that time on I began to feel slightly insecure: maybe not as insecure as many because obviously I've got a good education and I am a professional person, but there is no doubt that I began to think "well hang on, am I someone who is British or am I an immigrant?"' LORD TAYLOR OF WARWICK

alongside forms of exclusion is addressed in several of the other pieces. Bilkis Malek uses, among other things, the terrain of football, and more specifically the recent World Cup, to think about the contradictions which have accompanied the development of a destabilised, less secure English identity.

'... Part of the point about standing as an MP in Cheltenham was breaking the stereotype: I wasn't a footballer, or singer, or a socialist. I was in the Conservative Party ... I wanted to say there are no "no-go" areas, and that black people should be able to stand in Southall or Suffolk: there were these racist boundaries to be broken ... I wanted to encourage black people to think about a new identity, I didn't want us to sleepwalk into the next millennium. I was motivated by pride in the black community. Black people have injected vitality and glamour into British culture and in some respects you could see black people as the saviours of Britain. I think we have a great future.' LORD TAYLOR OF WARWICK

theory by processes of global migration and argues that if a more inclusive discursive and policy environment is to be achieved, new notions of citizenship

She shows that fixed notions of black/white difference co-exist with more inclusive syncretic forms; she shows that alongside multi-ethnicity there is still much anti-racist work to do.

This theme of negotiated belonging

She shows how differential responses to 'white' and 'black' violence construct the boundaries and 'essences' of Englishness and how these reflect co-existing processes of inclusion and exclusion. Bilkis Malek ends her piece where Phil Cole begins, by thinking about the implications of globalisation for the development of a more inclusive UK. Phil Cole considers the challenges posed to liberal political

and a re-shaped political theory are required.

While only a handful of the travellers on the *Windrush* may have been women, the experiences and contributions of diverse groups of black women have been central to both the changing landscapes of English/Britishness and the meanings of 'blackness' itself. Three of the contributions reflect this. Jackie Kay's short story captures

some of the joys, anxieties and disappointments experienced by those black women who were themselves migrants. She uses this fictional form to suggest some of the internal conversations that women of this generation may have had and in so doing gives us some of the flavour of the psychic and emotional

'I suppose a lot of organising in the early days was ... about things having a disproportionate effect on black men - educational exclusion, the 'Sus' laws and so on ... (and) there's a sense in which women felt very comfortable in working on the issue of racism with men, and were also able to be specific about women's issues ... I don't think that men were so comfortable ... I feel that dealing with the complexities and contradictions was easier for women than for men.' BARONESS VALERIE AMOS

consequences of the racialised and gendered division of labour that many black women encountered. But of course, black women were also active architects of their lives in the UK, and Julia Sudbury considers the ways in which diverse constituencies of *post-Windrush* women challenged both the terms of racial exclusion *and* the economies of gender which circulated among sections of the black populations. Challenges to what have often been presented as 'traditional', 'authentic' or 'appropriate' demonstrations of ethnic identity and belonging have been central to the work of black cultural producers over the last two decades. The work of Sonia Boyce has been among the most well-known and in her short photo-essay she captures the instabilities of black gendered identities in a positive statement about self-definition.

If the presence of the *Windrush* generations and their descendents has led to both the destabilisation of 'old' identities and forms of belonging, and to the emergence of new and plural ethnicities, so too has this presence led to transformations in the spatial mappings of the country. This issue is addressed in the photo-essay by Femi Franklin and in the piece by David Sibley. Femi Franklin's pictures and commentary beautifully capture the routes which

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Nigerian people established to hold connections between both here and 'home', and families and friends living in different towns around the country. Both this and David Sibley's contribution show the ways in which spaces and places carry racial meanings, and that territorialisation of racial location is linked to wider social and economic processes.

Location then is also a site of ambiguity, negotiation and contestation. This is made apparent in the interview with Simon Hamilton-Clarke and the piece by Roshi Kaidoo. As a twelve-year-old boy, Simon Hamilton-Clarke returns to some of the themes addressed more analytically by Anne Phoenix. In particular he shows the contingent character of racialised identities and belongings and clearly expresses the pains associated with racist exclusions. It is from this emotionally painful

'... It's easy to sniff at the idea of role models: I am very resistant to this thing about being put into a representational role, but it has become clearer and clearer that visibility is important. We need people who have power and influence. Communities and young people feel we have a right to be here and a contribution to make in all kinds of ways ... (and) ... I think that it is important for black women to be seen in a range of positions because it's about being seen as having ability in all kinds of different areas.'

BARONESS VALERIE AMOS

location that he begins to feel less certain about his claim to a form of Englishness. Yet, as an English boy he also displays many of the sea, sun and sand images that predominate in the British geographical imagination of the Caribbean. It is the common location in contemporary British social and geographical relations, as reflected in the fictional works of diverse migrant/settler communities, that pushes Roshi Naidoo to argue for a collective - i.e. an Asian, African as well as Caribbean - claim to the symbolic significance of *Windrush*. From this position of collective claim more inclusive cultural identities and political constituencies can be produced - ones which can deal with diversity and specificity as much as they can with commonality.

An insistent theme which emerges from many of the contributions is the necessity of both asserting and claiming a black British identity whilst simultaneously maintaining a sense of diasporic connection to other places,

identities, communities. An insistence on ethnic identities which are not closed, excluding and fixed, but open, shifting and inclusive. This would mean that just as black people can reconstruct themselves in the confluences of national-

i n t e r n a t i o n a l  
intersections and flows, so too can white people. This is precisely the issue which Val Wilmer addresses in her contribution. She shows how a growing contact and embeddedness in black music led to an ability to remake herself and recognise that she had always been partially formed through encounters with black cultural forms. It is the evidence of the possibility of re-appraising the racial and ethnic character of social, cultural and political landscapes, in this and many of the other

contributions, that leaves space for an optimistic reading of the future shape of a multi-racial/multi-cultural UK. It is equally clear though that there is much still to do in the development of an inclusive and adaptable society, and there are no guarantees as to which direction of pull will win out. What we do know is that the issues which are encapsulated in the symbolism of the *Empire Windrush* are not about to go away, and that first and subsequent generations will continue to plant their Hanging Baskets (in Wood Green and elsewhere) and use them as the source of their offerings to places and peoples that are now '.

'... If the British-born are rejected and their Britishness not acknowledged they will in turn reject their own identity as British. They will suffer, and are suffering, from a profound sense of loss.' BARONESS FLATHER  
'... In using the term Afro-Saxon, I was trying to get black people to think about their identity in a positive way, and it certainly ruffled some feathers: it was about trying to break boundaries.'

LORD TAYLOR

'...I would say ... that on the whole we live with ... different kinds of identities quite happily really. I can describe myself as British, as Guyanese, as African, as Caribbean, and I don't have a problem with that because I think that all those describe who I am ... I think part of the difficulty for a lot of people about saying that they are British is about coming to terms with what it means to identify with something that causes pain - racism.'

BARONESS VALERIE AMOS