Review Articles

Windrush

Unresolved Legacies

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Colin Grant, *Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush Generation*. London: Vintage, 2019, 309 pp. (Paper £9.99)

Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats*. London: Verso, 2019. 260 pp. (Paper £12.99)

Ian Sanjay Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*. London: Verso, 2021. vii + 344 pp. (Cloth £20.00)

Amelia Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment*. London: Guardian Faber, 2019. ix + 320 pp. (Cloth £18.99)

Luke de Noronha, *Deporting Black Britons: Portraits of Deportation to Jamaica*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2020. 320 pp. (Cloth £16.99)

On May 25, 2020 George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, was arrested in Minneapolis on suspicion he'd passed a counterfeit 20-dollar bill. Readers know the outcome. While under arrest he was murdered by a law officer, Derek Chauvin, in full public view, his colleagues watching unmoved—a modern-day lynching for all to see. Passers-by filmed the scene and the video footage

accelerated through the worlds of social media. Despite entire populations living under COVID-19 lock-ins, protests took off across the planet and Floyd was instantly accorded a posthumous existence in a globalized folklore. This was how Black Lives Matter entered Britain's nervous system. As the insurrectionary spirit crossed the Atlantic it acquired a distinctive national temper. Statues of imperial men, until a little while before largely unremarked, moved into the sights of battling forces, emotions charged.

Edward Colston was caught in this line of vision. Colston, in the late seventeenth century, had been a revered philanthropist in his native town of Bristol and a tireless agent in the Atlantic slave trade, accumulating immense Caribbean "interests." Hostility toward his persistent monumentalization had been intensifying for several months before June 7, 2020 when, in the wake of Floyd, Colston's 18-foot bronze likeness was torn down from Bristol's city center, dragged to the dockside, and dropped into the harbor. Placards announced: "Bristol Was Built on Slavery." On YouTube the course of his downfall has been endlessly replayed: the joyous iconoclasm; the stylized drama of the statue hitting the water; a soundtrack of carnivalesque revelry; and the waters closing in on him. Those interviewed reflected on the significance of the deed they'd perpetrated. "Why would I walk past [the statue] every day, knowing the history of it? That ... makes me feel that I don't matter."¹ In the course of a day, historical time had been rearranged. As one history sank, a new temporality—Colston and Floyd, superimposed in a provocative montage—rose to the surface. Symbolic reparation, of sorts.

It's as if in this moment in Britain the axis of race shifted. The pandemic nation was shaken, and the conventions of how race is publicly spoken of were redeployed. It's too early to judge how the fallout will settle. Even so, there is little doubt that a rupture of sorts, yet to be determined, has occurred.

As this emerging situation unfolds, the controversies of the historical past are subject to sharper contention. The state's attachments to creating a self-declared "hostile environment" for migrants has assumed a new gravity, forcing itself into the line of public vision and allowing public speech on the matter a greater resonance. By the second decade of the twenty-first century the memory of *Windrush* has come to summon darker spirits, competing with the

1 YouTube carries plenty of material. *Skynews* (June 7, 2020) offers a revealing reconstruction, including interviews with the demonstrators. It also shows Priti Patel, in an exquisite parody of herself, condemning the "disorder" as "utterly disgraceful"—<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=youtube+toppling+of+colston+statue+in+bristol&docid=608026816674531099&mid=9D1757F2442392FBCC739D1757F2442392FBCC73&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>.

upbeat commemorations that strive to mythologize the arrival of the West Indians at Tilbury in 1948 as the signal event in launching multicultural Britain.

Colin Grant tells the *Windrush* story, by now well known. But it's a story told here with vitality and warmth. The book was conceived before the realities of the "hostile environment" had hit the headlines. As often with Grant, his ethnographic imagination brings him up close to those who give life to his narrative. Indeed, it soon becomes apparent, sentence by sentence, that the life histories of those whom he discusses cannot possibly be explained—ordered, filed, stored away in the archives of the state—by the designation "immigrant." He presents us with a wonderfully unruly, unanticipated, always-moving reconstruction of human hopes, sometimes fulfilled, sometimes not, which open up to the reader the emotional undercurrents of the experience of migration. Grant is a son of *Windrush*. In many ways, he is the counterpart in the field of historiography to Andrea Levy in the field of fiction. In her novel *Small Island*, Levy put down on paper the story that had long been incubating inside her, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not. So too with Grant. This is the measure of his fine achievement.

As the remaining books under review demonstrate, the darker spirits that have come to inform the telling of the *Windrush* experience are coming to the fore. They have, after all, long been with us. Maya Goodfellow's interpretation is exemplary in bringing this fact into the light of day. She opens up the longer historical duration in order to provide temporal depth to the processes by which state practices came to alight upon the figure of the immigrant as a preternatural danger to the integrity of the nation. She achieves this with insight, her pacey style keeping readers on their toes. Her argument—while familiar in the historiography—constantly needs to be reiterated and presented to the larger readership. The story needs to enter public life. This she achieves with flair.

Ian Sanjay Patel presents a complementary argument, although from a more considered analytical standpoint. The ground covered is pretty much that which informs Maya Goodfellow. But the research is deeper and the argument tighter, infused as it is with a powerful knowledge of contemporary philosophies of human rights. This allows Patel to locate the discursive figure of the immigrant in a much wider historical panorama, in which the concept of statelessness—presciently present in the work of Hannah Arendt, arising from her own historical circumstances, but moving evermore to the center of things in our own times—offers an extraordinarily productive interpretative means to make sense of the histories of migration that confront us. This broad but telling analytical framework, combined with impressive archival research, enables him to deliver what I take to be the most compelling account of the long history

of Britain's immigration laws, from 1905 to the present. It's a book that leaves me full of wonder and admiration.

Of the titles under review, greatest attention goes to the work of Amelia Gentleman, a journalist with no prior attachments to the Caribbean. Part of her social milieu comprises those who command the highest reaches of the state, Boris Johnson, the prime minister, included. But as a jobbing journalist and as a citizen, she found she was outraged by the actions of the government toward a generation of Caribbean migrants. She saw what others closed their eyes to. She proved resolute in her determination to reveal the injustices she'd discovered and to ensure that the state righted the wrongs it had set in train. Backed by the *Guardian*, she labored tenaciously for the long period, effectively putting her life on hold. In terms of the public life of the nation, her book stands out as *the* prime mover in publicizing the contemporary depredations of migrancy and race.

The story she reconstructs is this. In 2012 a menacing shift occurred when the Conservative Coalition launched its Hostile Environment Working Group, chaired by David Cameron, the prime minister, the effect of which was to rereacialize a generation of West Indian migrants and, as this happened, to relocate those identified as culprits to a social shadowland beyond the law. The historic meanings signified by the category "immigrant" meant that much of the preparatory discursive work required for this to be achieved was already in train. The instigators of the strategy strained to show that they were handling the newly incriminated with undisguised, state-sanctioned hostility. The explicit term "hostile environment" had originated from inside the Labour government, five years earlier. State hostility to migrants, as practice, had long existed.² What was new was its strategic centrality as official, publicly-aired policy and the collateral effort to induce fear among the dark-skinned of the nation's citizens. In a chilling masquerade, this was presented—with matchless self-regard—as confirmation of the unbending decency of the nation's governors. Virtue abounded. Hostility and virtue become one.

The hostile environment was never a political sideshow, the personal fixation only of the home secretary, Theresa May, despite the fact that she was indeed zealous in pursuit of hostility. There was hardly a senior Conservative who didn't jump to sign up. With the United Kingdom Independence Party breathing down the necks of the main Westminster parties, plans for orches-

2 For one moving account, see Hazel V. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 15–18. In terms of state practice the elements of calculatedly hostile strategies have been coalescing for the past quarter of a century, going back at least to the death of Jamaican Joy Gardner at the hands of the Aliens Deportation Group in August 1993.

trating government hostility, as declared political objective, speedily coursed through the institutions of the state. They gave to the Conservative and LibDem Coalition, and its Conservative successors, renewed purpose, strategic clarity, and the means to recast the relations between state and citizen, tightening the authority of the former and circumscribing the scope of the latter. After a lifetime of living as British, an ageing Caribbean generation, having arrived legally and “in good faith,” discovered themselves caught in the state spotlight and classified retrospectively as “aliens,” the luckless among them “returned” to lands they either barely knew or didn’t know at all.

The hostile environment supplies a textbook example of how unthinking bigotries settle inside the state. The original intention of the politicians who willed the hostile environment into existence was, as the government’s words confirm, to make hostility happen. As May, the Home Secretary, explained to the Conservative party conference in 2013, her planned immigration bill would encourage the government “to get rid of people with no right to be here,” even while the criteria for rightful domicile were constantly shifting.³ The means for “getting rid of people” proved to be essentially administrative. In the eyes of those who staffed the state, the repeated compilation of dossiers of personal documentation provided the exclusive proof for establishing the truth of one’s social existence, ignoring the contingencies of the lives of those—once citizens—who’d found themselves stripped of their legal rights. Quotas fuelled the instrumental logic, working in this case as incentives for the private security services employed to get the job done. Human destinies—staying put or facing “removal”—became governed by signs on a spreadsheet. Once the putative malefactors were identified and detained in anonymous camps bunkered across the social landscape, the administrative process culminated in setting in motion a system of transportation whose purpose was to carry its manacled human cargo to far-off destinations, decreed by the state.

On paper, this is a strategy conducted by neutral officers of the state, devoid of personal emotion and without a bigot in sight. Race features in this scheme of things as merely an unfortunate contingency.

That this is so, or can appear to be so, informs the staggering act of dissociation exhibited by the key architects of the policy: Theresa May, Amber Rudd, Priti Patel. The first expressions of public unease toward the hostile environment were evident from October 2017. They evolved into a full-scale scandal, commonly reported as the “*Windrush* scandal.” The House of Commons

3 Theresa May, Conservative Party conference, Oct. 1, 2013: <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/theresa-may-2013-speech-to-conservative-party-conference/>.

launched an enquiry into the operations of the Home Office, the *Independent Review*, authored by Wendy Williams and duly published in July 2020. In its quietly forensic prose it delivered a comprehensive and devastating challenge. May, Rudd, and Patel remained willfully blind to the consequences of their own actions.⁴ Those responsible had engineered the hostile environment, as a calculated decision. Yet when the scandal broke, they couldn't comprehend the connections between the soulless, grubby dreams they'd pursued and the despair they'd inflicted on others. Williams's *Review* condemned the Home Office, echoing Hannah Arendt (again) for generating "an institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness toward the issue of race."⁵ Even after the *Review* had been published, and its findings officially acknowledged, no apology was forthcoming. The perpetrators saw nothing to apologize for. As the evidence of the human disrepair mounted, and the Home Office was obliged to announce the termination of the hostile environment, Patel insisted that the officials were not "bad people." When she promised "sweeping changes," it was as if the "system" had arrived like the virgin birth, through no human volition and when no one was looking.⁶ Those who had campaigned to halt the deportations she identified as "do-gooding celebrities."⁷ In no way was she implicated, and *she* certainly wasn't a "bad" person. Nor was race a material factor. How could it have been when, as Patel was keen to explain, she knew racism first-hand? Which prompts us to pursue the question: *how indeed?* It had all been, it seems, the cause of an administrative malfunction, which she pledged to correct.

In this scene Frantz Fanon's "nausea," which underwrites his classic *Black Skin, White Masks*, is reproduced in the larger social theater, mobilizing the powerful resources of the state. In 2015 "Paulette," one of the unfortunate characters who populate Amelia Gentleman's *exposé* of the *Windrush* scandal, received a letter from the Home Office headed by the ominous words

4 The single political casualty was Amber Rudd who, on April 16, 2018, had denied the existence of deportation quotas, which introduced numerical targets for the deportations. When Rudd's claims were shown to be misleading, she resigned her office on April 29. Yet she never saw any reason to apologize for the institutionalization of the hostile environment.

5 *Windrush Lessons Learned Review: Independent Review by Wendy Williams. Order by the House of Commons*, July 19, 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/windrush-lessons-learned-review>, 7 and 14, conceding that the misery generated by the Home Office was both foreseeable and avoidable.

6 Peter Walker, "Priti Patel Promises 'Compassionate' Home Office after *Windrush* Scandal," *Guardian* (July 21, 2020).

7 Kevin Rawlinson & Amelia Gentleman, "*Windrush* Victims Accuse Priti Patel of 'Deeply Insulting' Behaviour," *Guardian* (December 4, 2020). For the majority, the promised financial compensation has still not been forthcoming.

“Notice of Immigration Decision.” This is how she learned that she was to be “removed.” According to Amelia Gentleman, it shook “her sense of who she was.” Or in Paulette’s own words, “It made me feel like I didn’t exist” (pp. 17–18). We can imagine her retreating, like many before her, to a private sanctuary—her suitcase packed, her destiny sealed—and reflecting on the fate her black skin caused her.⁸

That Amelia Gentleman uncovered the details and human consequence of this state barbarism represents no more and no less than a vindication of the potential of the free press.

That’s not quite the end of the story. What happens when those poor souls identified by the state as “illegals” are “removed,” and returned to where—putatively, at least—they once came from? It’s the mission of Luke de Noronha to discover what otherwise, for the citizens of the metropole, remains beyond our vision. As a young scholar he was inspired to travel to Jamaica, to meet those returned, and to listen to their stories.⁹ The lives he uncovers are shattering in their impact, illuminating what too easily passes under the wire, confirming as well the complicity of those nations once under the tutelage of Britain but now, apparently, independent. His book provides a grisly epilogue to what conventionally passes as the *Windrush* narrative, revealing the intricacies of a peculiarly postmodern servitude for those condemned to become the wretched of the earth of our own times.

8 She appears in Gentleman’s book only under her first name. As Paulette Wilson she was a steadfast advocate of those mistreated by the British state. She died in July 2020 (Amelia Gentleman & Lucy Campbell, “*Windrush* Campaigner Paulette Wilson Dies Aged 64,” *Guardian*, July 23, 2020; Diane Abbott, “The Death of Paulette Wilson Must Mark the End of the Hostile Environment,” *Guardian*, July 24, 2020; and Amelia Gentleman, “Without Paulette Wilson, *Windrush* Might Have Remained Hidden,” *Guardian*, July, 24 2020). The only commentator to mention Wilson’s Rastafarian faith was Patrick Vernon (“Paulette Wilson Remembered,” *Guardian*, December 14, 2020).

9 Listen to Luke de Noronha’s heart-breaking conversations with those who have been “returned”—<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/deportation-discs/id1257537075>.