

Matthew Sherman

‘By de Ship-load, Colonizing Englan in Reverse:’
West Indian Immigration to Great Britain, 1948-1962

“You know what is behind you, now you have to create what is in front.”¹ This advice and journey is the plight of every immigrant who attempts to enter Great Britain from former colonies in the West Indies, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East. Each of them, unlike most in the Western World, have a historical memory of their past, but are traveling into the Western world in order to find what will allow them to create their own futures.

Since the end of World War II Great Britain has continuously faced a common political and international dilemma, Commonwealth immigration. This immigration has continued to bring former colonists to their previous imperial “parent” in order to search for something that will facilitate their future growth. There have been numerous studies on the relationship between the Western world and their former colonies, notably the works by Edward Said. By reversing the model that Said employs in his research, this paper will attempt to view the relationship from the vantage point of the immigrant. Through understanding the thought process of the emigrant prior to and during his migration, a new light will be shed on the treatment and influence of the immigrant upon arrival in Britain. Furthermore, the understanding of this relationship, and construction of identities by the immigrant, will lead to an analysis of the separation, both physical and social, of the immigrant and the host culture.

¹ Onyekachi Wambu, “Introduction,” In *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing about Black Britain*, ed. by Onyekachi Wambu, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998), 19-29. 19.

Edward Said's more notable works "Orientalism" and *Culture and Imperialism* concentrate on the relationship between the West and the "Other" by analyzing the geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic aspects of the Orient.² Said more thoroughly discusses his research model in the latter work, which is an extension of the former. In order to understand the model, which Said employs, it is necessary to look at the background on the model. The author uses two ideas in addition to what he has chronicled in "Orientalism": ¹the idea of a general worldwide pattern of imperial culture and ²the historical experience of resistance against empire.³ Said goes on to define culture in two ways. First, culture can refer to all practices and rituals that are separate from the economic, social, and political spheres and that exist in aesthetic forms. These aesthetic forms include the novel, art, poetry, etc.⁴ The second definition that Said uses is "a concept that includes a refining and elevating element." This part of culture causes a battle between political and ideological thought, helping it to be a source for the construction of identity.⁵ The author states that resistance to imperialism advanced at the same rate as imperialism itself. The increase in imperialism and resistance causes a change in culture and a reconstruction of identity.⁶

The main method to Said's model is to read individual aesthetic works, and from them to show the relationship between culture and empire. Analyzing the aesthetic forms of culture, specifically those created by the West, allow for a greater perception of how the West interacts with the Other.⁷ The view of both the West and the Other by the

² Edward Said, "Orientalism," *Georgia Review*, 31, (Spring 1977): 162-206. 162.

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xii.

⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.

⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxiv.

⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxii.

dominant culture causes a reconstruction of the identity of each. By looking at the forms of resistance against various imperialist strategies of the West, Said argues that it is possible for the relationship between the two to be understood. In reversal of this model, this paper will analyze the aesthetic culture of the Other in order to better understand the encounters of Commonwealth immigrants within British society. By looking at forms of adjustment strategies of the Other and the contrasting resistance strategies used by the host society allows for a greater perception of how the Other interacts with the West. This paper is based on writings of African and West Indian immigrants because they were the largest Commonwealth immigrant group between 1945-1962. The cultural works by colonists allow for the introduction into the mindset of these first emigrants and those that followed.

These writings give voice to the emergence of a split-labor market in post-war British society upon the arrival of West Indian workers. This market phenomenon places British workers on a higher level than the West Indians. The racial antagonism toward West Indians stems from capital and labor issues in this split-labor situation.⁸ Due to the antagonism that these workers encounter, they have been forced into a marginal working class, which tends to be characterized as "suffering from economic insecurity, unemployment, and underemployment."⁹

The antagonism that confronted West Indian immigrants was one that placed numerous racial and economic obstacles once they arrived in Britain. The advent of these problems seems to stem from past, as well as modern, situations. The increase of

⁸ Lydia Lindsey, "The Split-Labour Phenomenon: Its Impact on West Indian Workers as a Marginal Working Class in Birmingham, England, 1948-1962," *Journal of Negro History* 78, (Spring, 1993): 83-109. 83.

⁹ Lindsey, 83.

globalization and urbanization seem to have caused more West Indians not only into Britain, but also into British cities. This caused an increase of competition from native workers and an increased prominence in the “political” problem of West Indian immigrants.

Mark Stein, author of *Black British Literature*, states in his introduction that “black British literature not only deals with the situation of those who came from former colonies and their descendents, but also with the society which they discovered and continue to shape—and with those societies left behind.”¹⁰ This thought shows the importance of studying the writings by immigrants and former colonists in order to understand their view of their relationship to their adoptive home. Most scholars begin the era of colonial immigration to Britain in June 1948 with the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush*. With the ship’s arrival came the entrance of four hundred and ninety-two West Indian, specifically Jamaican, emigrants.¹¹ Over time from the arrival of these first West Indians, there has been a general shift from an initial tone of harmony and tolerance to an attitude of disharmony and intolerance between native British citizens and the black emigrants.¹² The shift in attitude ended the first wave of immigrants in 1962 with the introduction of the First Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which officially equated blackness “with second-class citizenship, with the status of undesirable immigrant.”¹³

¹⁰ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), xii.

¹¹ James Proctor, “General Introduction: ‘1948’/ ‘1998’—periodising postwar black Britain,” In *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. by James Proctor, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000): 1-12. 1.

¹² Proctor, 3.

¹³ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 382-383.

A general view held by Caribbean immigrants can be seen through Louise Bennett's eyes in her poem "Colonisation in Reverse:"

Jamaica people colonizing
Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by de tousan,
From country an from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load,
Jamaica is Englan boun.

Dem a pour out a Jamaica;
Everybody future plan
Is fi get a big-time job
An settle in de motherlan.¹⁴

Bennett's poem shows that people seeking to emigrate to England had the mindset that there was a kinship between them and England. It was their motherland. She states that all the Jamaicans had the same future plan—to find "a big time job." There was an anticipation of not just any kind of job, but work with status and prestige. This false hope held by the immigrants led to a feeling of alienation and abandonment once they arrived in England. Their kinship bond unraveled, as the children in the motherland rejected them.

Onyekachi Wambu goes further by saying "we came in awe and in search of a missing part of ourselves, which we believed had been stolen...came all this way only to find ourselves."¹⁵ Wambu explains that during the colonial era Britain, similar to other European countries, had a hold on the colonists' imaginations, had humiliated their bodies, taken over their economies, and had captured their souls. Therefore, emigrants

¹⁴ Louise Bennett, "Colonisation in Reverse" (1966), In *Writing Black Britain*, 16-17. 16.

¹⁵ Wambu, 22.

made this journey not to necessarily remain in Britain, or Europe, permanently, but to liberate their personal selves through interaction with the “white Other.”¹⁶ The literature of the immigrants to Britain shows how they dealt with their encounters with British society in their attempt to retake that, which was taken by the imperial power.

George Lamming discusses the attitude held by Wambu in his essay “Journey to an Expectation.” In the essay, Lamming discusses his experience and mindset, as he traveled to England with Sam Selvon around 1950. Lamming points out that his colonial status allowed him full citizenship in Britain.¹⁷ He explains that West Indians arrived in Britain in order to escape the colonial humiliation that they had always known. They saw Britain as being an open and free society that offered equal opportunity to *every* British citizen.¹⁸ The emigrants who were searching for work thought they would have an equal chance with white workers.¹⁹ The author goes on to point out that many of these emigrants have not given any thought to how and where they would live once they arrived in Britain, other than the need to find a job. Because of this lack of preparation, coupled with the post-war housing shortage, many emigrants are forced to live in a separate “ghetto” type area located on the outskirts of town.

Lamming, in an earlier work, discusses the plight of the emigrant in London in *The Emigrants*. This work tells the story of a group of West Indian emigrants to Britain who are in search of better conditions and treatment than they had in the West Indies. At the same time, the travelers hope to be able to redefine themselves in a place where they have never been, but still hold a slight attachment. Lamming goes on to show the plight

¹⁶ Wambu, 22.

¹⁷ George Lamming, “Journey to an Expectation” (1960), In *Writing Black Britain*, 57-60. 57.

¹⁸ Lamming, “Journey to an Expectation,” 58.

¹⁹ Lamming, “Journey to an Expectation,” 57-58.

of the group of emigrants in their search for work and housing.²⁰ In one part of the book, during the voyage to Britain the immigrants are talking about England with a British citizen. During the conversation the British citizen says to the immigrants, “England’s a pleasant place/ For those that are rich and free/ But England ain’t no place/ For guys that look like ye.”²¹ This passage foreshadows the problems that the immigrants will face once they arrive to England. In addition to the foreshadowing, this passage introduces the reader to the racism that awaits the immigrants once they arrive in Britain. Furthermore, this work as a whole acts as a warning to fellow immigrants who wish to travel to Britain for a “better break.”

Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* is a story about the lives of the emigrants that are apart of the first wave of West Indian arrivals to Britain. The story tells of the never-ending search for jobs, homes, money, and women.²² Toward the beginning of the novel the main character Moses advises Galahad, a new arrival to London, on how and where to go to find a job in London. Moses tells his new friend how to find the “employment exchange.” In explaining the employment exchange, Moses says, “You will have a lot of company there, you shouldn’t feel lonely.”²³ This discussion is the first glimpse that Selvon gives his reader into the extent of unemployment among West Indians in London. Selvon goes on to describe the constant migration from room to room around the city, along with the constant hustle in order to make money. This continuous movement and hustle can make it difficult for emigrants to ever feel rooted, or to find what they have come in search of. The kinship ties that immigrants initially feel toward

²⁰ G. Lewis Chandler, “Review: In Search of a ‘Better Break,’” *Phylon* 16, (1955): 478.

²¹ George Lamming, *The Emigrants*, (London: Allison & Busby, 1954), 118.

²² Onyekachi Wambu, Intro to “Sam Selvon: *The Lonely Londoners*,” In *Empire Windrush*. 91.

²³ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, (London: Penguin, 2006), 21.

one another and their homeland begin to disappear as they struggle to adapt to British society. Due to their continuous search, Selvon alludes to how these emigrants will remain distant and lonely no matter how hard they search for what they have traveled to Britain for.

Caryl Phillips discusses the intellectual thought held by some immigrants to Britain in a short story entitled “Coming Over.” In the story the protagonist Michael is conversing with three fellow emigrants aboard their ship about their knowledge of Britain. In the conversation, the four men begin discussing what they had read prior to their voyage. The two “works” that they discuss are Winston Churchill’s *History of the English People* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.²⁴ Works such as these do not give an accurate depiction of the Britain that the men will encounter, but rather the England that native British citizens have created and encounter. These works do not touch on the racist policy and society that awaited the immigrants when they stepped off the boat. With this sort of knowledge and expectation, the immigrants were not prepared for the world that awaits them. This work fits into Said’s revised model because the characters have a problematic relationship with Britain upon their arrival due to the mis-education that they have received from these British sources.

From these writings on the plight of the emigrant upon their entrance into British life, it is possible to study the relationship between these immigrants and the resistance of the host population to the settlers. Along their cultural relationship, these works allow for an analysis of how these immigrants live, their views of the future, the attitude of the native citizens, and the official political policy regarding the immigrants’ role in a free and “multicultural” society.

²⁴ Caryl Phillips, “Coming Over,” In *Writing Black Britain*, 196-200. 199.

Britain's general view of immigrants can be seen as a continuation of the toleration of racism and how people view "strangers" or foreigners with a look of disapproval or suspicion. Furthermore, Europeans are blamed for racist thought against those of African descent.²⁵ Saying that Britain's problem with immigration is an issue of "permanence of presence, not arrival," can summarize this view.²⁶ Britain attempts to ignore the gross inequality of opportunity among ethnicities, which leads to a sense of deprivation, feelings of valuelessness, and a lack of investment in society.²⁷ This lost sense leads the immigrants to lose their kinship with Britain, and causes a reconstruction of their identity within the host society. Europe has decided to either not see black people in society or to judge them as an insignificant minority.²⁸

Entering further into the relationship between migration and racism, it is important to understand that the expression of interdependence between trading areas is a major cause for migration to Europe, not only economic, social, and demographic disparities.²⁹ The influx of emigrants, with their own cultures, identities, and institutions, into Europe, cause the existing notions of national identity and citizenship to be questioned by native Europeans.³⁰ As the West Indians further try to enter into British society, they begin to view themselves as Caribbean-British as opposed to just British. This reconstruction of identity is the result of the treatment of immigrants in Britain.

²⁵ Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987), 121.

²⁶ Phillips, *European Tribe*, 123.

²⁷ Phillips, *European Tribe*, 127.

²⁸ Phillips, *European Tribe*, 128.

²⁹ Stephen Castles, "Migrations and Minorities in Europe. Perspectives for the 1990s: Eleven Hypotheses," In *Racism and Migration in Western Europe*, ed. by J. Solomos, J. Wrench, (Oxford: Berg, 1993): 17-34. 20.

³⁰ Castles, 27.

From analyzing the literature of the past, it is easy to see a relationship between the thought process of the emigrant entering Europe in 1948 and the conditions that they faced upon their arrival. Furthermore, the treatment of emigrants to Europe over the past half century, as described in the literary works of former colonial writers, have led to an apprehension of Western cultural ideas and government. In addition to this historical maltreatment, the immigrants were becoming aware of the policies that the British state had adopted in an attempt to marginalize non-English citizens. This leads to a separation of the immigrants from the native citizens upon arrival into British society.

The separation upon migration leads to a deconstruction and reconstruction of identity for the immigrants based on the apprehension of the West, which is supported by the past, and present, relationship. The identity, both individual and community, is reconstructed on the basis of the type of space that the immigrant community has created and the geographical distance from the immigrants' homeland and family. These factors are what allow for the extent to which a community and individual retain their traditional beliefs and practices. The time distance from previous mistreatment of fellow immigrants is not an issue in this situation because the ethnicities from which the immigrants derive have a more intact historical memory than the peoples in the West.

Those that immigrate to Britain, as can be seen in the literary works of the past five decades, want to belong to the British society to which they have traveled. They have migrated in order to help themselves and their families, not to destroy the native culture of their host society. Because immigrants have chosen in the past to attempt to integrate, as opposed to assimilate, into society, they face discrimination and unfair policymaking. The refusal to assimilate can be understood from the standpoint of these

immigrants as former colonists. The oppression that they faced under imperial Europe led to a mistrust of Western solutions that failed the former colonies. Rather than to help the native colonial citizens to succeed in the building of their nations, the Western policies exploited the people, their land, and their economies. Furthermore, the continued toleration of racism and sexism within British society increases the problems that immigrants face upon their arrival. This racism and sexism is not addressed within British society because it is thought to be a cultural aspect as opposed to a political or policymaking issue. This culture, which has traditionally been defined by the dominant, white society, therefore, does not see the injustice. But, with the arrival and increase in not only a West Indian, but also African, Middle Eastern, and Indian populations, the imperial British culture and society is forced to become further defined by the minority immigrant culture.

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