

Shifting Jamaican Migrant Identities:

Out to the New Worlds, and back to the Homeland

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Abstract

This paper uses the evidence of life story interviews with migrant members of 45 transnational Jamaican families who have kin in Britain and North America. While migrants to Britain and Canada most often develop various forms of mixed identity, migrants to the United States strongly maintain a straightforward Jamaican identity, rejecting identification as Americans. We suggest a key reason for these contrasts is the continuing segregation of housing and black-white sociability in the United States. The final twist, however, is with those who return to Jamaica from Britain, to discover – and accept - that they are regarded there as English.

Introduction

For our recently published book *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic* (Ian Randle, 2006), we carried out over a hundred life story interviews with members of transnational Jamaican families who have kin in North America and Britain as well as Jamaica. As we shall see, they gave fascinating evidence of how and why migration can reshape identity.

But first, a brief word on how we may have influenced these interviews ourselves. For roughly half of the interviews both of us were present, while the remainder were recorded separately by Elaine or Paul. Given our very different social images, Elaine a younger black Jamaican-Canadian woman and Paul an older white Englishman, whoever led the interview could have had a significant influence in shaping the testimonies, and

we looked carefully to see how far this was so. The really important difference seemed to be in the setting up of the interview, which Elaine was able to achieve much more easily and quickly than Paul – indeed he was sometimes given a prolonged grilling before starting. In the interviews, on the other hand, it seems that the importance of these differences in social position quickly faded. We both followed the same life story format which we had worked out together, and although Elaine's style is a little more conversational, there are no obvious differences in the broad content of the interviews. Not only is the broad coverage the same, but we equally often recorded men and women who used many *patois* phrases; and we were each as often told about 'outside' children, or illegal activities, or experiences of racism. The really striking differences are much more between the interviewees themselves. Thus some would give brief responses, while others would articulate their memories at length or shape some of their story according to their religious beliefs - which could be with either of us. We have also been able to compare our recorded material with many informal conversations with migrant Jamaicans, visiting families, travelling round Jamaica in route taxis and so on. All this gives us confidence in its quality as evidence. So what did we learn about migrant identity?

When we first went to New York to interview migrants and their children for our book, their stories in many ways echoed those we had already heard in Britain and Canada, but we were taken by surprise by one sharp difference. Almost unanimously, however materially successful, and often despite having taken American citizenship, they emphatically rejected the possibility that they had become Americans. As one woman put it, 'I'm not American. I have American citizenship, but I'm not an American. I'm a

Jamaican'. While in both Britain and Canada, we found migrants more likely to describe themselves as having acquired a mixed identity, whether as 'Jamaican Canadian' or in more complex ways, migrants to the United States almost all saw themselves quite simply as Jamaicans. This is not what might be expected. There seems to be little difference in terms of overall black-white occupational inequalities between Britain, Canada and the United States: in each country the broad figures show twice as many blacks as whites unemployed, half as many as whites in professional jobs, and so on. But in the United States wage rates are highest, and in addition, West Indians there are better educated and occupationally more successful than indigenous African Americans. Hence on a simple materialistic basis, Jamaicans in America should be more likely to identify with their new country. Why is this not so?

It is of course impossible to make more than suggestive comparisons, if only because our migrant families reflect the historical changes in migration currents. Thus those who came from Jamaica to Britain all arrived between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, before more restrictive immigration legislation was imposed. Later migrants all went to the United States and Canada, which both switched to more open immigration policies from the early 1970s. Hence one reason why migrants to Britain are less likely to think of themselves as straightforwardly Jamaican could be because they have spent much more of their lives away from Jamaica. It is also important to remember that Jamaica itself changed over these decades. The older migrants had grown up in a Jamaican society in which race and class were very closely tied together; they expected whites to be at the top, and indeed could feel disconcerted when they were not. But the younger migrants were leaving a Jamaica which was becoming racially more open, and

its black majority population more self-confident; and thus may have been more likely to feel surprise and anger at experiencing racist discrimination in North America than the older generation had been in Britain.

But time does not help to explain the contrast in attitudes between migrants to Canada and the United States, which are almost as different as between migrants to the United States and Britain. There must have been other factors also at play. We explored the significance of culture shock on first arrival, but the stories of encountering a new climate, a new urban environment and a new society on the one hand, and of emotional loss on the other, echo down the generations, wherever the migrants went. We also asked whether there were important differences in the alienating processes of immigration: but while the interviews certainly showed how the difficulties in getting work visas kept many migrants in low paid jobs, and pushed them towards cheating the system, these were again difficulties wherever the migrants went. It was only when we looked at differences in the forms of racism that we began to see why it might be more difficult for migrants to identify with the United States.

Living with Racism

The older generation of migrants who came to Britain had to deal with the most overt racism, which was at that time not legally restricted either in terms of work or housing discrimination, or in public comment. But on the other hand they came from a Jamaica which was itself sharply stratified by colour, and some had already directly experienced discrimination there, which in the memory could weigh still worse: as with Rose Lyle, who felt she had been cheated of her chances in the scholarship examination by a white

English girl coached by the Inspector himself - 'I've never forgotten that thing, that's lived with me ever since... Every time I think of it, my blood boils!'

Thus it was these older migrants to Britain who had to cope with the most open racism when at work. For example, three worked as nurses: one remembers being constantly abused in the ward by a white nurse, another was pressurised into not taking a full training, while the third, Rose, who did retrain, came back to find she had lost her job. Perhaps the most effective of anti-racial measures in all three countries have been to make such work discrimination illegal, so that none of the younger migrants to North America had experienced it. It may have been a key to making upward social mobility more of a real possibility for them.

In Britain in the 1960s even some of the church clergy were openly racist. When Josephine Buxton, a Jamaican pastor's wife, went with a friend to a Baptist church in Paddington, afterwards 'the Minister shook her hand, and said to her, "Thank you for coming. Please don't come back"'. Later on such a comment had become unthinkable. In Britain there was also an important change in housing discrimination, which was one of the commonest racist experiences of the earliest migrants. Josephine remembers how 'there could be, like, the advertisement at the corner shop... there is a room for rent at such a place, "Enquire within". And then, "No children. No blacks. No Irish. No dogs."'. Rufus Rawlings recalled the frustration of first seeking lodgings as a black man with a white wife: "Hello, I see advertisement, 'Room for let'" "Yes, thank you". Right, and you go there. "Oh, oh!" when they see your face. "The room is - Oh, I went out and husband let the room." You know what I mean?'

Such housing discrimination has proved a phase in Britain not only because it became illegal. West Indian migrants have not clustered in all-black neighbourhoods because, beginning with some of the earliest, enough of them have chosen to move away to buy houses or place children in better schools in mainly white districts. Rufus was driven by the difficulties in renting to buy a 15-room house in (then working-class and white) Islington, which he restored and filled with lodgers. In Britain and also in Canada we found that our interviewees without exception live in areas which are either multiracial or predominately white.

In the United States, by contrast, an older housing pattern has continued. Up to the 1960s racial segregation in terms of public facilities had been not only permitted, but also legally imposed in a third of the country, along with the prohibition of mixed marriages. Earlier large-scale migration of American blacks from the south had resulted in the growth of segregated black neighbourhoods in the northern cities. This pattern has not been shaken by later anti-discrimination legislation, and in New York there have been incidents of the fire-bombing of both the homes of West Indians who have moved into white neighbourhoods, and of the estate offices who have sold to them. Jamaicans thus have had little choice but to slot into it. With the exception of one high-earning professional, we found all of our New York migrants living in non-white neighbourhoods - half of them mixed black and Latino in the Bronx, and the other half one 100 per cent black in Brooklyn. As we headed in the subway train towards the Jamaican heartland in Brooklyn, the last whites got off, leaving only Paul on the train: for this is a place where white people neither live nor work. Black Brooklyn feels more like a South African location than anywhere in Canada or Britain. It helps to cut off migrants from the

mainstream American white society, and sustains their feeling of resentment at marginalisation and discrimination. Celia Mackay, for example, thought she knew about racism from the subtleties of Jamaican attitudes to skin colour:

But coming to America is an entirely different story. An entirely different story. Coming to America, it's like a culture shock, because the things I see people do, because of the colour of your skin, seem to me stupid. If you are going to tell somebody, "You have your money, but you can't live in a certain area because you're black", "You cannot get a certain loan because you are black"... to me it is outrageous. That is what you call racism. And to me, it is stupid... When I think about it, it gets me really angry. Because as far as I'm concerned, we're all created as one... You're getting a cut, and it's the same blood that comes out.

Segregation of housing, through separating whites and blacks, also leads to a subtly pervasive racism in sociability in the United States, of a kind which again we rarely found expressed by migrants to Britain or Canada.

For the earlier migrants to Britain there certainly were difficulties, particularly for black men seeking partners. Rufus felt of the women, 'lots were interested, but they was under pressure... You would be considered a prostitute if you seen with a black man.' But he did find a white woman to marry, for life. And even after the sex ratio had evened up, many Jamaicans remained keen for mixed social relationships.

Lola Woods, who first migrated to Britain, encouraged her daughters to mix as children, telling them, 'You mix. You always have to work a but harder, but mix'. It was therefore a shock when her daughters followed her to New York for them to find that mixing with whites was seen as at best eccentric, and at the worst a target for abuse, with

black American men shouting, “Aren’t we good enough for ya?” or “You ought to be whipped”, or throwing bottles. Both daughters eventually returned to England. Lola reflects, ‘People are people... You can have nice white people, you have bitchy black people... Some black people can’t deal with white people. They just hate them... I don’t grow up that way’. It is in Lola’s spirit that today in Britain mixed West Indian-white couples have become commonplace, to the point that British-born men of West Indian descent are as likely to live with white as black women.

While in Canada black-white couples have also become more common, in the United States, even in the great metropolitan cities, they remain remarkably rare. Jamaicans in New York found this kind of segregated sociability doubly disturbing. Firstly, there are those who belonged to mixed-race families - ‘a black and white integrated family’ - or who previously had been used to white friends, sometimes ‘lots’, and feel their absence. We both asked Gene Trellissick whether she had white friends in Brooklyn. She replied, ‘Not here. But in Jamaica, I had a whole bunch of white friends from Canada’ – and others from Europe. But it was unlikely now. ‘You hardly see white people around here. [To Paul:] You see why you look so strange! He does! No, it does look strange, seeing a white person around here’.

Those who were living in helps for white families could also see the segregation from the white side of the barrier, as if looking back with blind eyes. Sandrine Porto lived in with a white family who claimed to be ‘anti-racist’, but in two years, ‘they have parties and things, and I’ve never seen a black person’. When Celia is pushing the elderly man she cares for in a wheelchair, she notices how his friends ‘would actually come up to him and would totally ignore me, white friends. Totally ignore me. “And how are you

keeping? How are they taking care of you?"... As it I'm not there. ... So I just, like, get up and walk away. It hurts because you are a human being, you know.'

Jamaicans in the United States, despite their relative income and educational successes by comparison both with black Americans and with Jamaicans in Britain, thus still live within patterns of housing and sociability which they feel deeply stigmatising. We see these forms of discrimination, coming on top of the distortions imposed by the immigration system, as the most likely keys to their different sense of identity.

Maintaining or Shifting Identities

All but two of our Jamaican migrants to the United States, whether or not they had taken American citizenship, still considered themselves Jamaican. Nor they want to be confused with 'African Americans'. As Gene Trelissick put it: 'I don't know where it came up with this African thing from all of a sudden. You know, you could identify yourself as African African or whatever you want to identify yourself as, but I know, deep down... anything else you wanna hyphenate or add to it, so be it, but I'm Jamaican all the way!'

Only two took a different line. Dana Harrod is a successful accountant, who described herself as having a Jamaican identity, 'proud of my heritage', but through citizenship 'a proud American as well'. The other is Selassie Jordan, a travelling rasta trader who dreams of return to his roots in Africa: 'me done visualise myself on the plains of Africa, hopefully Ethiopia... We are African and we must think African... I hate America... Cause me have no future a Babylon, I have no future here, right here'.

Selassie's vision of 'cosmic travelling', as he calls it, is in a sense a form of anti-American transnationalism, re-seeking lost roots.

In practice the most transnational of our migrants is Lola, who has lived 31 years in the United States after 22 years in Britain, and now lives in Florida, but comes regularly to London. She again exclaims, 'I'm not American!' But interestingly, while she says she must be Jamaican - 'I have to, I was born there' – she feels her heart is tied to England. 'In England I feel comfortable... It's like I've come home, when I go to England'.

In Britain and in Canada there were certainly some of our migrants who continued to identify themselves simply as Jamaican. But in both countries we found many who expressed forms of mixed identity. There were two strands among them.

Most often they simply recognised that time and experience had changed them, and that their children belonged to the new country. Josephine Buxton put this with the biblical resonances of a pastor's wife:

I am like, I am like Moses, never forget that he was a Hebrew, even being brought up at the palace of the king.... I know that I am from Jamaica, I having so much of my old culture in me. I have adopted so many others of other country until, I think, I've lost much of my culture too. But there is the little bit that left there... that I am a Jamaican.

A much smaller group of successful men saw themselves in relation to an increasingly globalised world as 'cosmopolitan' transnationals. From Canada Arnold Houghton projected an optimistic future vision: 'I think the way the world is going... I don't see people living, or being born in one place, growing up, spending all their life in

one place... I see people moving around a lot more than they've done in the past, probably having dual residences, different times of the year, or different periods of their life'. He describes his hopes for his children: 'I'd like them to see not just Canada as some place where they can live and grow up and make it, but they should be able to see the whole world as some place where they can explore and grow and achieve.'

Returning Home

Probably for the great majority of migrants their original dream was to do well enough to make a successful return in later life to Jamaica. Dick Woodward thought his family, who came to London in the 1950s, were typical in originally hoping to return within three years, living in a state of readiness to travel back, with 'grips under their beds'. Among our interviewees, despite the passage of time over half still cherish this dream, and twelve have returned to Jamaica for substantial periods, of whom six are still living there. All of them, whether they stayed or not, were positive about their decision to come back. They are part of a much wider migratory current which is having a crucial impact on the Jamaican economy too, for the pensions and other incomes of returnees are now second only to tourism in their contribution to foreign currency earnings. The pioneers of return migration have principally been English, because they migrated earlier and so are closer to retirement.

You can find clusters of returnees' new houses right around the Jamaican coastline, their grey concrete frames thrust up through the bright green foliage like a regatta of dinghy sails in the Caribbean sea. When you look more closely, quite often they are unfinished, great three-storey frames with yawning unfilled gaps. More often

with time they are finished, painted sparkling white, doors and windows filled with elaborately twisted metal grilles, and rooms inside big enough for a complete family reunion. These houses are the fruit of years of struggle, first of all in Britain or America, but then in Jamaica too.

Completing the house was one step in the dream of return. But in many ways a still tougher challenge was to re-integrate in Jamaican society. Winnie Busfield had one strong advantage, that she had been a Seventh Day Adventist from childhood, including in England, where she `used to be a missionary... I brought up my children to love the Lord.' But for Winnie re-integrating was hard:

It was difficult at first. Very very difficult.. As if the whole custom had changed. People attitude was rougher, so it was a whole generation with the new ideas, more disrespectful to adults, and so forth, so it was hard.

But I am a very determined person, I overcome all those... I am now well into the system. I fight my way into the system! Even the churches! Oh yes! Today Winnie's local friends are `mainly through the church.' She has learnt to speak *patois* again, and she has become a travelling missionary in Jamaica. But this very process of resettling has brought a profound change in her sense of identity. She has come to feel that she is perhaps as much English as Jamaican.

Now, if you look at my community here, you will see that it's mainly returning residents, so that makes it much easier, because you have so much in common... If it was all the everyday Jamaicans, I could not cope with it... I could not relate to somebody that I hadn't shared the same culture with for forty years. You understand? ... We go from England, so you have a lot of things in common...

because most of your years you've spent with them... You can talk about a place in England, and they can chat about the place. Now, when I got back to Jamaica here, there is hardly any place I know... I know more of England than Jamaica...

Now, sometimes they call us 'foreigners', oh yes. In England we were foreigners, you come back to Jamaica, your country, you're foreigners. So you get it from both sides.

Another successful returnee, Vivia Perrin, now a local nurse and community activist in Jamaica, has no doubt about her identity. She says, 'If you ask me, I say "I'm British" first. I don't care who don't like it, I am English first. But I will do what I need to do, where I am...'

Conclusion

The contrasting attitudes in the reshaping of migrant identities revealed by these testimonies have been shaped by many complex influences. All of these lives move between different societies at different points in historical time. The most general tendency is for migrants to develop more complex mixed identities over time. But for many migrants there can a particularly strong counter-pressure from social marginalisation: most often in the new worlds to which they migrate, but for some, in their own homeland too.