

The Human Journey: Migration, Identity And Performance.¹

C. M. Harclyde Walcott

The University of the West Indies, Barbados

I

The first great migrations

We, Homo Sapiens, are a migratory species; our lives always start with a migration. At the generally euphoric moment of sexual intercourse that is technically referred to as a climax, quite a large number of sperm cells are ejected from the male of our species into the vagina of the female of our species. These little fellows then energetically embark on a journey of some considerable importance. This is for them a journey in search of opportunity, it is fundamentally a migration. They move from one body to another, specifically in search of a female egg that would accept them. I wish to suggest that this is probably the first great migration of all human life, as we know it.

In this area of activity there are of course variations in methods of delivery and delivery systems, as is exemplified by the practices associated, formally or informally, with assisted pregnancies, as with in vitro-fertilisation and so on, but all that is peripheral to the facts of the basic principle of the journey.

For our species, the second great migration is the journey of the product of that first great migration, the baby, from its inner womb world of amniotic fluid to the outer world of fresh or not so fresh air. It is generally a relatively short trip but for our purposes it is a migration of considerable importance.

Migration, therefore, I wish to posit, is natural to our species. It is fundamentally the process via which all human life starts.

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0151.apr0203>

The basic dictionary definition of the word migration is quite simply, “movement from one part of something to another”.

The individual, depending on the culture in which he or she is raised, in the process of transiting through the various stages of life, from those who are yet to be born to those who are ancestors, exhibits this movement from one part of something to another, in the process of becoming. Of course, one of the most common and easily recognised manifestations of this notion are practices associated with marriage, where the individual because of the marriage contract, whether formal or informal, is required to physically move to or away from one family unit to another family unit, while in the process creating a new family unit. This movement, in physical terms, may be of short or enormous distances.

II

The great waves of migration

Thus far our concentration has been on the individual. I wish now to turn to what we may refer to as the first great migrations of groups of individuals.

The available science indicates that our species began life in Sub-Saharan Africa and that proceeding from the rift valleys of East Africa, we as a species migrated, north, east, south and west, to first populate the African continent and later by stages, to populate the globe. The reality of this fact therefore suggests that all members of our species, alive in our world today, are products of both Africa and an African migration.

So, irrespective of whether one chooses to believe the science or not, the available data and logic leads us to a conclusion that we are all migrants or the product of migrants, be it of recent or of ancient migrations.

If we accept the logic of this thinking, we ought to be able to start to imagine and to in fact see the continent of Africa in a fashion that is quite different, in fact in diametrical opposition to the way that has become the “norm” in the popular imagination of the vast majority of the world’s populations. Even if for no other reason than that of the fact that places of birth are always seen and celebrated as places that are sacred.

Yuval Noah Harari’s book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* usefully illustrates the validity of the logic of the claim and in a relatively relaxed fashion illuminates the discussion of the reality of our origins. That we, as a species, migrated out of Africa, at least for the present scientific moment, is quite beyond dispute. Also beyond dispute is the fact that we are fundamentally one humanity that over the course of our several migrations have formed a great variety of different: communities; cultures; and identities. All of these are manifestations of our response to the realities of our lived experience; our creative, intellectual and

The Human Journey: Migration, Identity And Performance.

physical responses to the challenges posed by geography, topography, climate, altitude, vegetation, and nutrition etc.

Similarly, when we think of the Caribbean and its peopling we must also start at or with that first migration that provided the region with its first populations.

I make this point to suggest that any understanding of the nature of any human population that starts its interrogation of a population at a point other than at the beginning is doomed to produce an inaccurate understanding of that population.

And why do I make this point: I make this point because I have arrived at the impression that it has become increasingly popular to start discussions of the Caribbean and of Africa with concentrations on the topics of enslavement and colonization. These are start points which of course neglect thousands of years of history, warp useful analysis and feed false imaginings.

While I accept the preoccupation of the academic with matters of periodization, I have always been concerned by the information and intent, whether conscious or otherwise, that informs this exercise of categorization. And for that reason, as well as several others I have always held that useful discussion of the history of Africa and African peoples cannot start with colonization, that the discussion of the Caribbean cannot start with enslavement and that the discussion of the Americas cannot usefully start with conquest.

Let me also at this point invoke the name of our premier poet, Kamau Brathwaite, and that of our esteemed novelist, George Lamming, in making the point that the whole business of being able to name the things in one's world is of fundamental importance to the psyche of a people. The exercise of the imagination and the power to name the things in one's environment ought to be treated as sovereign and ought not to be easily relinquished. So, one's language ought to be treated as sacred. That logic, I would contend, also extends to the exercise of periodization, the naming of periods.

In brief, as we currently understand it from the scientific record, the original populations of the Caribbean were the descendants of the original migrants of that first great exodus from Africa, that made their way traveling by land, sea and river through what we now call the Middle East, to Europe across Asia, and crossing the Bering Straits land bridge to Alaska, then headed south along the west coast of the American Continent and finally into the islands of Caribbean.

III

The re-definition of migrant

The term "migrant/immigrant" of late has become in much of the popular imagination of Europe and of the United States of America, the official classical representation of the concept of "othering"; the creation of the other.

The most recent and really quite considerably informing manifestation of this phenomenon can probably be located in the utterances of the current (2019) sitting President of the United States of America. Who, some have suggested, has been quite fascist in his characterisation of the expanding number of individuals who are currently fleeing their homelands; countries that have historically been negatively impacted by American interference, intervention, and general foreign policy. But maybe even more illuminating has been the special attention which he has chosen to extend, specifically, to the four new members of the American congress: all ladies of colour, who were democratically elected by their various constituents.

As a colleague said to me in a recent email, "Immigrant" is [now] a code word for 'of colour,' or 'black.' In the US and Canada, a white, Christian, pro-capitalist, clean-shaven English-speaker from Oxford or Manchester is rarely seen as an immigrant. More recently, Italians, Greeks, Jews and others who were not historically "white" have become "white."

A most interesting observation.

He continued, "In Canada similarly, the word "Jamaican" [now] serves the same purpose for those who speak the meta language of "race." It is the same as "Caribbean" which is a synonym for "Jamaican" which is synonymous for 'black,' dread locks,' 'drugs,'...etc".

It is worth noting that by this measure Melania, the wife of the 45th President of the United States of America is not an immigrant. The English, Irish and Scottish who live in Canada are 'white' and generally do not need a hyphen to distinguish them as do others who we learn of as Jamaican-Canadian, Somali-Canadian, Punjabi-Canadian.

What we are essentially talking about here is the strength of power and the resultant ability it offers to choose. The matter of choice is fundamentally important, both the ability of the individual as well as that of the group. It is this ability to choose which identity one will perform, and when one will perform it, that is facilitated by social power.

Concomitant to this is of course the power to decide the identity of the other as well as to determine their place in the world. This then is the nature of privilege.

In what some may describe as the good old days the powerless either stayed almost exclusively at home, as variously defined as domicile residence or country, or worked for the powerful on terms that were dictated by the powerful. The life of the powerless was lived fundamentally at the mercy of the powerful.

Many would argue that that is the world that many, both in America as well as in Europe, are fervently intent on restoring.

Many years ago, I happened to have been traveling along the Linden highway, in Guyana, and as we were driving along, I saw in the distance a man who was

The Human Journey: Migration, Identity And Performance.

walking in the same direction along the shoulder of the highway in a relatively relaxed but purposed fashion. The Guyanese colleague with whom I was traveling noticed my curiosity at this man walking in the “middle of nowhere” and offered that the gentleman was probably heading off to visit relatives maybe in Brazil. He further went on to indicate that the borders really meant nothing to the Amerindian populations who have walked the length and breadth of the continent for centuries.

All human populations though they generally venerate the old, also actively seek to create the new. The authentic manifestations of a culture are valued as the classical representations of its civilisation. But all human populations are also forced to engage with the question(s) of their current reality and that current reality is constantly changing. There is therefore always a tension between the old and the new, always a discussion between the constant and the variable, always a contestation between the generation of the past, the present and that of the next.

And much of this finds its genesis in perceptions of self and in perceptions of avenues of opportunity. Put differently: in perceptions of identity and in perceptions of space that would allow for the creation and performance of identity.

And all of that is concerned fundamentally with the internal dynamic but of course there is also the external.

In this regard, I wish to suggest that the migrant is fundamentally a change agent. He or she either grows into and absorbs a culture into him or herself or the culture absorbs what is fundamentally him or her or some variety of a mix of some sort, which may be variously discussed via the relevant theories of acculturations, creolisation, assimilation etc.

In this process invariably something changes, that change may be small or large, it may be gradual or rapid, it may be comprehensive or selective but what is certain is that change takes place and although it may not be immediately discernible it often is nevertheless measurable. So, whether latent or manifested, the social psychologist can often point to it.

These internally and externally generated sources of change I wish to suggest are equally essential mechanisms that allow for a culture to effectively demonstrate the improvement of the quality of life for the members of its community.

The immigrant, therefore, in my view may be described as an agent of pollination, who performs the function of the pollinator. An active and efficient cross-fertiliser that is provided by the process of migrations, which refresh cultures and of course lend to the creation of the new.

This is also true of the forced migrations that characterised the transportation, sale and enslavement of millions of African peoples in the so called “New World”, starting in the early sixteenth century and continuing well into the nineteenth. One lasting consequence of that horrific period that is worthy of note in this

context are in the levels of retention and syncretisation that the region demonstrates in a very wide and varied range of its celebrated sacred as well as creative manifestations.

Our long battle for freedom and personhood is also a reality of this long period of subjugation. And from it comes our valued tradition of resistance, revolt, rebellion and revolution, led by among others, Toussaint L' Overture, J. J. Thomas, C. L. R. James, and Marcus "Mosiah" Garvey. In the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, the world has become very familiar with a thought system that had its origins in the nineteen thirties ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica. That thought system has allowed the modern world access to and appreciation of a concept of self and of beauty that hitherto had not existed. A concept rooted in an African Caribbean reality: Rastafari, with its principal prophet, the Right Honourable Robert "Nesta" Marley in the vanguard. And its music, reggae, dub and dance-hall ubiquitous.

Enslavement, this "period of barbarity", as it has been characterised in the literature by Hilary Beckles and others, remains in many ways an open wound the effects of which resonate deeply across the modern world. Many in the political administration of countries that were the principal beneficiaries of the practice of chattel slavery in the "new world" have insisted that the past is the past and that the descendants of the former enslaved ought to simply get on with it. Our response in the region, in the past, has met with consistent resistance but in these early years of the twenty-first century our response has never been better focused and organised. The peoples of the Caribbean and the Americas are now resolute and engaged in the articulation of the arguments necessary to achieve reparations from the perpetrators of what is now universally acknowledged as a crime against humanity of tremendous proportions.

IV

Contemporary products of migration

Rihanna,

we can speak of as a double product of migration. She is the daughter of a Barbadian father and a Guyanese mother who migrated to Barbados. She herself migrated to New York City, New York immediately on leaving high school and has just this year moved to London, England, where she has bought a house.

With that said, Rihanna remains fundamentally Barbadian in both her identity and in her performance identity. She is a supremely confident individual who has never tried to be American. She remains very socially and politically aware with a very keen activist focus. Her work with schools, providing a quality education, especially for girls in Africa is well known and celebrated. As is her work with her

The Human Journey: Migration, Identity And Performance.

foundation, named after her now deceased grandmother and grandfather, which provides substantial medical assistance to the health services sector in Barbados.

Rupee,

born in Germany to a German mother and a Barbadian father, who was at the time serving in the British military. Early life in Germany and England, then migrated to Barbados and established himself as a performer and has been very popular and continuously on tour for the last ten plus years.

Sir Willard White,

world famous Jamaican bass baritone opera singer, with signature performances of major characters in all the major operas. He has been honoured with a British Knighthood for his services to music and culture.

Kamau Brathwaite,

is an acclaimed poet, historian, theorist and essayist. A Barbadian by birth, he did his graduate work in England, lived and worked in Ghana for many years before moving back to the Caribbean to teach at the University of the West Indies. He ended his teaching career at New York University.

C. L. R. James,

Intellectual, writer, historian

George Lamming

Poet, novelist, theorist, essayist,

Edwidge Danticat,

Novelist

And the list can go on and on.

V

The performer in a post-post-colonial environment

I wish to suggest that the performer in a post-post-colonial environment has of necessity to reclaim the pre-colonial. I would argue that it is in the pre-colonial that the essentials of the authentic are lodged and that it is from that source that the performer must drink heartily, if his or her art is to be grounded and to flourish.

I also wish to suggest that at the absolute centre of all performance techniques are traditions, rituals and belief systems. In short, the bedrock of the lived reality of human populations. And it is from these sources that its art draws its nourishment and to it that it returns to be refreshed. It is through this lens that the new realities are interpreted and new syntheses arrived at.

Our work is much the same as it has always been, at the centre of our reason for being must be engagement. Active engagement with the world in a fashion that lends to the improvement of the quality of life for humanity. The nature of this engagement is of necessity multi-dimensional and invariably dangerous. But as we are reminded by the life's work of Wole Soyinka, our art is not a place for the coward.

We must remember that performance, especially in the context of non-western environments, is fundamentally a process, not a product. It is a process that is premised on the notion of engagement. The artist therefore must engage with vision and truth.

VI

And finally, may I invite you to imagine, or maybe more correctly to reimagine the continent of Africa as a space without nation state territorial boundary lines, where there is freedom of movement of goods, services and of individuals, where the continent and its resources are efficiently and effectively administered for the enhancement of the quality of life of the populations of the continent.

May I further invite you to imagine air and sea transport routes and systems that serve the specific needs of the continent rather than routings through the "metropolitan" capitals. And here I am of course thinking of direct flights between the continent and South America and the Caribbean.

And lastly, I invite you to imagine work that is focused on/and around the lives of the ordinary men and women who make our humanity possible, and who traverse this world and openly enrich it, both advertently and inadvertently. The migrants/immigrants that we all are.

VII

The words migrant/immigrant now must be stripped of their contemporary pejorative connotation and reclaimed as simply a word that communicates the actual factual reality of the fact of the migration of the individual. Our humanity demands it; our performance art must articulate and animate it.

The Human Journey: Migration, Identity And Performance.

References

Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: HarperCollins.