Caribbean migration to Canada

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Migration has long been a feature of Caribbean societies. Created first as a result of the Atlantic slave trade, and later due to other involuntary forms of migration such as that produced by indentured servitude from India, Caribbean territories such as Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Jamaica, Barbados, and Haiti are generally viewed as migration-oriented societies. Emancipation and independence from colonial powers did little to transform the economic and social reality of these societies. In response, Caribbean people began to move internally to find employment. With the agricultural expansion of fruit company production in Central America, Caribbean people found work on banana plantations in Costa Rica. Others moved to Panama, where their labor was critical in the construction of the Panama Canal and railways in the early 20th century.

Caribbean migration

Following the World War II, thousands of Caribbean people, most of whom were British subjects, migrated to the United Kingdom. When Britain implemented immigration policies to curtail migration from its former colonies, Caribbean migrants (especially those from the English-speaking Caribbean) turned to the United States and Canada. Notwithstanding that the United States has remained the primary destination for Caribbean migrants since the mid-20th century, Canada has also attracted its fair share of migrants from the English regions in particular.

Haitian migration

The rationale for Caribbean migration has been fairly consistent. Uneven development and high levels of unemployment and underemployment have been the main impetus. While Caribbean migration is often associated with the desire to improve opportunities for social and economic mobility, these are not the only reasons. Some people view migration as form of adventure; others migrate for educational purposes, family reunification, or recruitment by foreign employers (Walker 1984; Flynn 2004; Jones 2008). Haitian migrants tend to have a different migration trajectory from, for example, Barbadians. Fleeing the Duvalier dictatorships of Papa Doc and Baby Doc, who were in power from 1957 through to the early 1970s, Haitians entered Canada as political and economic refugees.

Unlike other Caribbean migrants, Haitian migration to Canada was precipitated by political and economic crisis (Simmons et al. 2005). As of 2006, there are more than half a million people of Caribbean descent living in major Canadian cities with the largest population from Jamaica, followed by Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, and Haiti (M'Baye et al. 2009). Yet the presence of Caribbean people on Canadian soil dates back to the 19th century and from then on has been inextricably linked to labor demands which reflect race, gender, and class dimensions.

Caribbean slavery and the Maroons

While slavery did not develop in Canada on a major scale similar to the United States, the first group of Caribbean people on Canadian soil consisted of enslaved men and women who were brought to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1688. Given the harsh Canadian climate, the enslaved were deployed on farms part of the year, and were hired out by their owners to work as skilled and unskilled labor. Another group – much larger than the slave population – was the Maroons who were brought to Canada in 1796. A rebellious group from Jamaica who

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resisted British colonial rule, the Maroons were tricked into surrendering their arms during one of their many disputes with the British. The most recalcitrant of the group – which totaled 568 women, children, and men – were transported to Halifax.

Expectations that the Maroons would eventually become compliant and adapt to Canadian Christian doctrines and work ethic (by becoming farmers and laborers) hardly came to fruition (Pachai & Bishop 2006). The Maroons petitioned the British government to leave Nova Scotia, and their request was granted. In 1800, of the original group, 551 Maroons departed to Sierra Leone, West Africa. Currently, very little is known about the descendants of those Maroons who stayed behind. Overall, Caribbean migration to Canada remained at a minimum throughout the next century with a few dozen families migrating to Victoria, British Columbia in 1850. By the end of the 19th century, there was a slight increase in Caribbean migration to the East Coast, specifically from Barbados. In response to the underdevelopment in the region as a consequence of colonialism, the Barbadian government subsidized the cost of transportation for these early migrants. Although these men were skilled carpenters and mechanics, they were restricted to tedious work in the coal of mines of Sydney, Nova Scotia. The concentration of Caribbean migrants in certain areas of the Canadian workforce would continue well into the 20th century.

Post-World War II Caribbean labor migration

The migration of Caribbean people remained sporadic until after World War II. Major transformation in Canadian immigration policies in 1962 and 1967, respectively, coupled with a labor shortage resulted in increased migration to Canada from the Caribbean. These watershed moments were critical because until that time the Canadian state had curtailed Caribbean migration. In terms of its international reputation, Canada is generally viewed as a benevolent nation that generally welcomes people of all backgrounds to its shores, but this has not always been the case.

As a white settler colony, Canada was intent on ensuring that its population, despite the presence of First Nations people, reflected its Northern European heritage. Immigration officials felt that certain groups of people would erode the country's national fiber and it was their duty to protect Canada from these undesirables. To justify exclusionary immigration policies, immigration officials drew on racist and sexist stereotypes of Caribbean people as lazy and sexually promiscuous (Schultz 1982). Besides emphasizing negative qualities assumed to be inherent to Caribbean people as a way to justify Canada's racist exclusionary policies, they also argued, erroneously, that people from tropical countries would experience climate adaptation problems. These restrictions present in Canada's immigration policies remained even in the face of pressing labor needs.

Caribbean migration to Quebec

To comply with the demands of middle-class Quebeçois for cheap labor, domestic workers were recruited by the Canadian government from the francophone Caribbean island of Guadeloupe in 1910. Skeptical about allowing too many Caribbean people into Canada, only 100 domestics were allowed to settle in Quebec. This recruitment scheme was short-lived because these women were deemed unfit to participate in the country's settlement initiative. While this scheme led to the migration of a small group of Caribbean women to Canada, it revealed how race, gender, and class were central to the management of Caribbean labor. During World War I, Caribbean men were recruited to work in Cape Breton mines as a much-needed replacement for the men who were fighting in Europe. Once the soldiers returned to resume their positions, these migrants were left with very few employment prospects. Consequently, they migrated to Toronto and Montreal where they were joined by their families. By 1921, there were approximately 1,200 Caribbean people in Toronto and about 400 in Montreal. In addition to those

migrants who were brought to work as laborers, some were living in Canada temporarily as students, while others found employment as railway porters, bellhops, and maids. The Depression starting in 1929 led the government to limit migration to Canada to those deemed suitable for Canada's national building project. During this period, migration from the Caribbean virtually ceased. In fact, in 1941, the Caribbean population was lower than what it had been in 1921.

Demand for low wage labor, 1960s to present

For almost fifty years, Caribbean migration remained at an all-time low until the second domestic scheme was initiated in 1955. As with the first scheme, 100 women were allowed into Canada during the first year, 200 in 1956, and 280 in 1959. Even though Caribbean people were not sought after or welcomed to Canada, they were recruited to fill a niche in the labor market that historically had been associated with black women, thereby reinforcing racist and sexist ideologies about who and what kinds of bodies are suited for certain kinds of work. Ironically, a number of these women were lower-middle-class and middle-class teachers and nurses who had extensive experience in their home countries, but could only enter Canada as domestic workers. The scheme was terminated in 1966, but the need for cheap, temporary, and mobile labor remained – hence the introduction of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP). Jamaica was the first country to participate in this program, followed a few years later by smaller Caribbean islands, among them Anguilla, Barbuda, Antigua, Dominica, as well as Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago. Initially, SAWP relied only on male labor, but in the late 1980s women were encouraged to apply. Admitted as temporary-visa migrant workers, they worked primarily in southwestern Ontario, harvesting fruit or picking mushrooms and tobacco. Unlike some of the domestic workers in the second scheme, who were allowed to apply for landed immigrant status (i.e. permanent residency), agricultural workers were temporary workers. These women and men belonged to a pool of low-cost labor supply that was necessary to ensure that Canada maintained a competitive edge in the global economy. The historical motivation of constructing Canada as a white society was circumvented by the demand for both skilled and unskilled laborers, especially in light of postwar expansion.

1960s immigration laws

The introduction of new immigration laws in the 1960s resulted in an emphasis on "objective" criteria such as education and skills as the basis to determine migrants' eligibility to enter Canada. In other words, admittance was no longer based on race, ethnicity, or national origin. Referred to as the "universal points system," this change in immigration policy led to an increase in migration from the Caribbean. The number of Caribbean immigrants who arrived in Canada in 1967 was 5,641, and in 1971 it was 10,843 (Census of Canada 1971). Between 1973 and 1978 Caribbean migrants (including those from Guyana) represented more than 10 percent of the total number of all landed immigrants in Canada (Henry 1999). Most of these migrants were technical and professional workers, such as teachers and nurses. During the 1960s, Ontario Separate School board officials obtained permission to recruit, interview, and hire qualified elementary teachers from the Caribbean. With respect to nurses, some migrated on their own volition, others heard about the nursing shortage, while others were recruited by private agencies and hospital personnel who traveled especially to Britain to interview nurses for employment in Canada. Caribbean nurses who migrated first to Britain and then to Canada belong to the category referred to as the "double-lap migration." One characteristic of Caribbean migration is the disproportionate number of women who often migrated alone. Clearly, the domestic schemes contributed to this phenomenon. In their desire to improve their life circumstances, the migrants contributed to the "brain drain" in the Caribbean,

which continues to be evident in more recent migratory patterns.

Race, class, and gender

Moving to another geographic location necessitates grappling with and navigating the core knowledge frameworks and values of the dominant culture. Thus, feelings of not belonging, nostalgia for homes left behind, identity formation and reformation – which is influenced by the nexus of race, class, and gender – at different moments characterize the Caribbean migrant experience. These newcomers learned that race, class, and gender impacted their interactions with whites, their wages, and their opportunities for advancement, as well as their overall social location in Canadian society. Even though the changes to the 1967 immigration provisions meant that they were younger and more qualified than other immigrant groups, Caribbean migrants faced difficulties with how they were situated in Canadian workplaces. Despite possessing the requisite qualifications for jobs, racist hiring practices forced Caribbean migrants to accept jobs that were not commensurate with their qualifications. Caribbean nurses, whether trained in the Caribbean or in Britain, found that upon arrival in Canada nursing bodies had a difficult time adjudicating their "foreign" qualifications. Some of these nurses had to work in non-professional categories until they upgraded, which meant a loss in salary. While Caribbean migrants, especially women, tended to have higher levels of labor force participation, they were often concentrated in specific niches (service and manual) in the Canadian economy.

Transnationalism and the Caribbean diaspora in Canada

Migration does not always involve displacement or detachment from the country of origin. In Canada, Caribbean migrants are a part of a diasporic dynamic transnational community. They engage in activities which are social, political, economic, and cultural in the Caribbean as well as in regions with a large Caribbean population, such as New York City. Families from the Caribbean, New York City, and the United Kingdom often visit Canada for reunions or for the annual Caribana Parade. While transnationalism – the links and affiliations migrants engage in across borders – is hardly a novel phenomenon, globalization has intensified these connections. These transnational networks of relationships and linkages transcend national borders and involve remittances, gifts, phone calls, yearly visits to the various Caribbean islands, and dual citizenship status in their original and current homes.

A common example of transnational relationship involves children and other family members left behind in the Caribbean and the mothers who support them from their wages derived from working overseas (Crawford 2003). Indeed, social networking sites, such as Facebook, have made staying connected with friends and family in the Caribbean much easier. Transnational relationships can be viewed both as a general strategy that migrants deploy or a social space that transcends borders. As a practice, transnationalism is not limited to those migrants who came to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, but to their children who are now considered "one-and-a-half" generation (those who migrated as children) or second-generation Caribbean Canadians.

Unlike their parents, the one-and-a-half and second-generation Caribbean Canadians have made inroads into professional areas and spaces that were restricted for their parents because of systemic and institutionalized racism. This is not to suggest that the one-and-a-half and second-generation Caribbean Canadians have been unaffected by forms of oppression. On the contrary, while they are definitely more successful than their parents, a disproportionate number of this group have faced challenges as a result of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression which has made it extremely difficult for them to participate in and contribute to Canadian society. What is unique about the one-and-a-half and second-generation Caribbean Canadians is that they

are not necessarily tied to their parents' homeland, but construct more hybridized identifications. That is, they draw on aspects of their parents creolized Caribbean culture and practices and other forms of black diasporic culture while maintaining aspects of Canadian culture. This is evident, for example, in how Hip-Hop and spoken-word artists engage in the process of border crossing, exemplifying transnationalism in practice. These artists borrow from other black artistic forms to create and produce a syncretic and hybridized mix; they also celebrate their connectedness to other spaces and places (Walcott 1997; Flynn & Marraste 2008). In so doing, these artists reveal certain affiliations and continuities in terms of broader diasporic concerns.

Conclusion

Decades have passed since the first major wave of Caribbean migrants set foot on Canadian soil, and while the reality of being migrants has meant the construction of an imagined Caribbean community, this has never actually existed. Caribbean people are not only diverse as a result of their colonial heritage; the communities in Canada are demarcated by race, color, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. These differences were often downplayed initially as a response to the inequalities Caribbean migrants faced in Canada. Consequently, it has been the one-and-a-half and second-generation Caribbean Canadians who have insisted on challenging monolithic constructions of a Caribbean community especially in relation to a queer and gender identity. Even though the parents of one-and-a-half and second-generation Caribbean Canadians faced all forms of discrimination, they persevered, and have made important contributions to Canadian society.

SEE ALSO: Canada, immigration and settlement; Canada, migration, 20th century; Caribbean African diaspora, 19th–20th century; Caribbean, French-speaking, migration and settlement; Farm laborers, United States and Canada

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