

A Good Enough Migration Experience

Cathy Aymer

There are many reasons for thinking about this topic and agreeing to give this paper. Firstly, it is for my own benefit, to help me to develop my skills as a reflective individual and professional. Secondly, I have been thinking about the crisis in Montserrat caused by the volcanic eruption and this has led me to reflect on the meaning of 'home' and what I can recall of my earlier experiences. My autobiography may be unique but my understanding of the self will lead me into a better understanding of my professional life as a black woman working with other black people. Finally, I am involved with research into the experiences of refugee children and this will assist my sense-making of their migration experiences. For as Kant suggests 'we see things, not as they are, but as we are'.

I shall begin where I can hear myself say to someone, 'actually, I had a very privileged background'. What can a black woman born to 'peasant' parents on Montserrat, a tiny island (32 square miles) that to this day remains a British colony, mean by such a statement?

My mother belonged to a generation of third world women who, whilst having an intuitive understanding of their bodies, had little or no knowledge of their biology. So, having heard about something called 'the change' from older women was rather surprised to discover, in her late forties, that the funny feelings she had been having were due to pregnancy rather than menopause. My mother had one living daughter of 13 and had had three still births, but to my father I was his first born. He would have liked a boy, but was more than happy to settle for me. Still, I was a small baby and in a time of high infant mortality and a culture that valued big babies, my mother has often related tales of having to 'feed me up' in the first months of my life. Little did she realise that she was sowing the seeds of my weight problem in later years, yet I am pleased that she ensured my survival.

My parents, and in particular my father, were great story tellers, so I have heard many stories of my life between birth and about eight years, but there are very few that I recall myself. My memory of people and events unless they involve immediate family and significant adults, such as my godmother, are very hazy. It is

not surprising for there were many changes in my life between the ages of five years and about eight years. Firstly my father made plans to emigrate to England in order to make a home for us and then to send for the rest of the family. Just before he left my maternal grandmother died. I don't recall my feelings about her death but I remember that she was the one who was mostly concerned with the physical care of the immediate family that consisted of my father, mother, two sisters and myself. She told me many stories about the world and first nurtured my curiosity. The concept of story telling is very important to me. What are the stories we hear about ourselves and about other black people? Are these stories that are limiting and diminishing or are they stories that open up possibilities for us as we grow up?

When my father left for England I recall a sense of excitement, anticipation, adventure and a mercenary expectation of him sending us beautiful things from England. I describe my parents as peasants because they worked a small piece of land and their way of investing any money they had was by buying and rearing one or two cows and other farm animals. As these cows had calves, they would sell some and keep some. Those they kept were then named for their children and if and when they were sold, the children would in some way benefit from the sale. It was by selling his cows that my father was able to pay for his passage to England and subsequently over the next two years send for my elder sister, then my mother, then my younger sister and myself.

I have here to return to my grandmother. She taught me to read from the only book she knew, the bible, and by the age of three she had taught me everything she knew. Although my father takes credit for the idea, I suspect it was my grandmother who persuaded him to send me to school then and pay the (old) sixpence per week fee to do this. In the early 1950's this was a lot of money to spare for the education of a girl child. The 'school' was in fact a cross between a kindergarten and a dame school. This was no pre-school play group, no one o'clock club or day nursery. Parents who could barely afford it paid good money for their children to be taught reading, writing and arithmetic. The teacher, often retired, would hold the school in her parlour and drill her small charges in their studies.

I have only good memories of this time although I don't recall the detail. I loved learning, was good at it and could not get enough of it. So, by the time I set off for England at the age of approximate eight years, I was very accomplished at the 3R's (with a special aptitude for maths) in an island where very few adults were literate or numerate, where schooling was not yet compulsory before the age of seven and where spending a small fortune to educate a village girl was seen as the height of stupidity by other people in the village.

A story my father used to tell which I particularly liked hearing was when at about the age of four, he bought me a pair of plimsolls. Apparently, I was at first very proud of them but by the end of the first day of wearing them, I ended up wearing them round my neck and no persuasion could make me wear them on my feet. I told my father that I would not wear them because none of the other children had shoes. Whilst I would like to think that this was the beginning of my social conscience, my political awareness, my need to feel connected with and share the experiences of other people, I can't help but notice that this did not stop me from holding on to the shoes.

My sense of privilege can be seen from those early experiences of parents who adored me and encouraged my curiosity in the world even under adverse circumstances. Although they were not educated, they gave me a love for books that they bought for me, from their meagre resources. They spent money on me as a child, they were generous but did not seek anything in return.

One of the legacies of colonialism is that black people in Britain are continually grappling with feelings of belonging and unbelonging, a wish to 'here' and a wish to 'home'. The situation is fundamentally unstable and it is little wonder that some black people are unable to survive these psychological pressures. For those early migrants, coming to Britain was a leap into the unknown, they were pioneers setting out, not knowing what they would encounter, but with a fundamental belief that one day they would return home. The idea of retiring to Montserrat, although not named, I am sure hovers at the edge of my consciousness. Maybe the function of home is to have a mythical place to which one can escape as long as one never goes there.

The train journey from Southampton to London was exciting once I had warmed up enough to notice the world outside the carriage. I have no idea what my first impressions were of this reunion for what was more immediate was the sense of panic that I felt. This came from two sources, firstly the sense of awe at seeing so many white people in one place. The white people I had known had been the priests and nuns, the others were just wealthy people who owned the cotton plantations and other important land and I certainly did not know them. The second source of panic was the fact that they were all running. The tide of all these white people running away swept me along and I also ran. My parents found me fairly quickly. I know now that these were only commuters going about their business. Their relief at finding me was my first impression of my parents. We welcomed my younger sister the following year.

This conference is going to pay attention to the stories about the traumas of separation and reunion of Caribbean children with their families, the effects of which have caused longstanding emotional difficulty for many migrants, but my story was one that had a extremely happy ending. I was welcomed into a stable family environment in which my siblings and I could feel secure and safe and, as a young girl growing up, I prospered both in my education and in my emotional life. It would be interesting to chart the lives of all Montserrat immigrants who arrived in the 1950's in order to explore their different outcomes and to identify the factors that led to 'success' or 'failure' within this sometimes hostile environment. Any lessons that can be gleaned from this, I suspect, would be of great importance to assist the recent arrivals as they navigate the murky waters of life in Britain.

Black people who arrived in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s have fundamentally changed the British landscape. They too have been transformed in many ways. The relationships between those who stayed in the Caribbean and those who left for Britain has changed forever as have patterns of financial dependence which were fostered between 'here' and 'back home'. I was no exception, as coming to Britain severed my connections with 'back home' in many ways.

At school I found my niche as a bright pupil and the investment that my father had made paid off. I knew more than the majority of other children in my class and this impressed some of my classmates enough to move beyond the overt racism of the 50's and 60's. I did extremely well at junior school and yet neither my family nor myself could understand why I was not able to go to grammar school. My mother tried to find out whether I had or had not passed the eleven plus examinations and was never told a direct answer other than that I would be attending the secondary modern school.

Fortunately my mother knew that one of the members of her church was a schoolteacher and asked her advice about what to do next. She was able to tell my mother about a girl's grammar school where entrance was purely by the result of sitting an entrance exam and an interview with the headmistress and furthermore a child could be accepted there at any time in their educational career. My mother then put on her hat and coat and went to 'see someone about this'. So it was that I eventually gained entrance to a girl's grammar school with high academic standards and an expectation that all girls would stay till 18 and go on to higher education. It was also the case that I was one of only two black girls in the whole school.

My experience is a fairly typical scenario, where the father left first, then the mother leaving the children to live with grandparents or other kinfolk. Much has been written that has valorised the benefits of grandparents and the psychological parenting of the extended family. This love helped many of us to survive the difficulties of separation from our parents at this early age. However, they instilled in us the certain family values, namely, compliance and obedience. The values in Britain in those days, and particularly so now, stressed assertiveness, independence and autonomy. As I grew up, I was aware that some problems with my parents and some difficulties in adjusting within our family came about from the discrepancies which exist when trying to adhere to these two sets of family values.

In the journey through life we are presented with a series of transformational moments that, I believe, help to at least form a shield around a damaged psyche, in order to protect it from further damage. There are unhealthy ways of doing this such as denial and destructive lifestyles. However, there are also some life-enhancing ways. Some of my own transformational moments have been

- Parents who loved me and made a central place for me in their thoughts
- Parents who encouraged my curiosity about the world even under adverse circumstances
- Parents who spent money on me as a child. They were generous but wanted nothing in return
- Teachers and ministers who encouraged me and helped me to find ways forward

Our migration experiences continue to affect our ability to be good enough parents, good enough professionals and good enough clients. What do I mean by good enough? People who are able to draw on their internal resources, people who are able to seek help and be discriminating about what is offered so that they can make the

most of that help. How else are black people in Britain going to develop a sense of identity, belongingness, good mental health and psychic well-being?

My migration experiences have led me into asking certain questions of myself. How can I contribute to creating the conditions in which all those with whom I come into contact can have, as a right, those things which up to now I have perceived as a privilege? That is, what types of 'maps of healing' am I seeking to construct within my own life as well as in the research process? For as bell hooks so poignantly puts it:

"Within white supremacist capitalist culture, black people are not supposed to be 'well'. The culture makes 'wellness' a white luxury. To choose against that culture, to choose wellness, we must be dedicated to the truth."¹

Some black people have been so damaged by their experiences that they cannot seek wellness. My personal history has helped me to seek 'wellness'. To search after positives, to establish my own sense of agency within a racist culture is the primary subversive act that I can or wish to undertake.

Notes

1. hooks, b (1993). *Sisters of the Yam*. p. 29. South End Press, Boston (Mass.)