

## **Migration and Decolonization in the Caribbean: A Book Review of**

**Birkenmaier, A. (2020). Caribbean  
Migrations: The Legacies of Colonialism.  
Rutgers University.**

**Cantres. J.G. (2020) Blackening Britain:  
Caribbean Radicalism from Windrush to  
Decolonization. Rowman & Littlefield.**

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The historical effects of migration on the cultural and identity formation of Caribbean diasporas have important implications for social science research on the concepts of national identity and belonging. The books reviewed analyse colonialism's influence on migration across the Caribbean. Specifically, the books emphasize how activism, scholarship, art, and resistance shape people's relationships when on the move. There are several similarities between each author's approach to researching migration in the Caribbean. First, each acknowledges the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, regardless of methods. Second, each highlights the political transformations and resistance movements rooted in Caribbean migration history. Third, the authors signal the importance of understanding legal, historical, and cultural standpoints, highlighting migration as the impetus of the modern age. The authors diverge in their approach to identity and belonging, and the geographic and social

spaces occupied by Caribbean migrants. Birkenmaier's discussion focuses on the United States, while Cantres's is set in the United Kingdom.

In this review, I summarize the overall scope of each, identify the similarities in each author's approach to researching colonialism and migration in the Caribbean as well as how the different approaches to analysing migration in the Caribbean might further inform our understanding of colonialism, migration (both forced and voluntary), and identity formation. Furthermore, this review pays close attention to Birkenmaier's and Cantres's discussions on the interplay of migration policies, immigrant identities, migrant agencies, and colonial legacies that shape how social science research understands movement across the region and reception in the host society.

### **Caribbean Migrations: The Legacies of Colonialism**

Birkenmaier's book is a collection of writings that take a non-traditional approach to social science research. The book offers a pan-Caribbean approach to better understanding migration as both the outgrowth of the modern worldwide system and as an individual choice that can produce its own creative forms of collective intervention. Birkenmaier intends to "give a comprehensive picture of the cultural and political role played by migration in the Caribbean and the United States, allowing for large-scale theoretical analysis [...] and the interpretation of individual stories represented in literature, music, and arts" (Birkenmaier, 2020, p. 3). The primary lesson that *Caribbean Migrations* seeks to impart is that migrants and nomads across the Caribbean are not passive recipients of colonialism's impact and its unrelenting implications but that notions of belonging and identity are constantly renegotiated at home and abroad.

This sixteen-chapter book is divided into three parts. Part One, *Unincorporated Subjects*, "tackles the experiences of island nations and their current or former colonizers and the implications of the ambiguous legal status of Puerto Rico and Guamanian citizens of the U.S. on notions of modern subjecthood" (p.15). A central argument, that binds the chapters in Part Two, titled *Technologies of Representation* is "that even in the case of countries that are proud of their national geographies, such as Cuba and Jamaica, those who left their country but still identify with it risk becoming culturally invisible back on the island" (Birkenmaier, 2020, p. 126). Lastly, Part Three, *Legacies of Colonialism*, addresses "the most basic form of mediation necessary when speaking of migration: language; it discusses how linguistic and, more broadly, cultural fragmentation can be overcome through collaborative efforts and musical or poetic challenges to monolingualism" (Birkenmaier, 2020, p. 203). Furthermore, it calls

attention to the challenges posed by the constant contact and migration among islands within the Caribbean and by an itinerant life from there to elsewhere are considerable – not of a linguistic nature" (p. 204).

There are two key arguments that Birkenmaier makes for an interdisciplinary approach to research and writing about Caribbean migration. First, Birkenmaier notes that the dominance of "scholarly" work on the study of movement, colonialism, and transnationalism across the Caribbean has wholly ignored how non-scholarly work has allowed for alternatives in how we conceptualize the larger-than-national space of the Caribbean, where exiled and diaspora communities actively negotiate how they want to be perceived at home and in their host countries" (Birkenmaier, 2020, p. 4). Thus, absent a non-scholarly approach to how we envision migration and transnationalism in the Caribbean, the existing research undertaken is often approached through the lens of single disciplines. As such, a single-disciplinary approach to studying migration, colonialism, and transnationalism in the Caribbean may perpetuate historically unjust systems of minimizing a collective voice and local context, which, for Birkenmaier, is problematic:

By studying the experience of migration and nomadism in different local contexts but with attention to how it can mobilize new social dynamics and ways of asserting a collective voice, we hope to contribute to debates on how legacies of colonialism can be challenged and confronted in small and large ways in the Caribbean and beyond. (p. 6)

Birkenmaier's book seems to arrive at a point where critical discussions and research on the role of colonialism in shaping migration, transnationalism, and identity formation uncovers and decodes the importance of non-scholarly narratives and how non-scholarly perspectives can be used to elevate narratives which are created and shared among the marginalized and oppressed. However, *Caribbean Migrations* and its contributors want scholars to push toward a more just perspective that moves beyond the single disciplines. In order to have the most significant impact and efficacy, social science research on the Caribbean must also demonstrate how the back-and-forth of Caribbean citizens has produced transnational intellectual and social formations even as much as colonialism has historically been at the heart of the ongoing social and economic marginalization of Caribbean societies" (Birkenmaier, 2020, p. 4).

## **Blackening Britain: Caribbean Radicalism from Windrush to Decolonization**

Cantres's *Blackening Britain: Caribbean Radicalism from Windrush to Decolonization* is a seven-chapter book about how West Indian artists, activists, intellectuals, and political actors conceptualized their relationship with Britain. The book, according to Cantres, "is a move away from British identity to radical, revolutionary consciousness rooted in West Indian background and forged in the contentious space of metropolitan Britain" (p. xii). In other words, *Blackening Britain* "considers the complex structures of colonial societies and understands West Indians as historical actors shaped and informed by a confluence of factors, experiences, and historical relationships" (p. xiii). To "interrogate West Indians' conception of their relationship to Britain", Cantres focuses on three different micro areas that mark the radicalization and changing identification patterns among West Indian migrants in London during the twentieth century. These micro areas include the interwar years through 1948, 1948-1962, which focuses on the British Nationality Act and the 1962 Commonwealth Act, and between 1962-1971, which was distinguished by West Indian radicalization, coinciding with the Immigration Act in 1971. The book focuses on the experiences of "industrial workers, students from the British Caribbean, and migrants active in community and professional associations" (p. xv) during these periods.

*Blackening Britain* makes three central claims. The first discusses how West Indians were agents of a process that involved both a negotiation of British society and burgeoning patterns of mutual identification among the migrants. In Chapter One, Cantres highlights the historical relationships that have endured between the West Indies and Britain. Cantres claims that "[t]he dichotomy of freedom/enslavement legally correlated precisely to white/black forming the basis for the social structure in the colonies and guiding colonial relationships for centuries" (p. 3). As such, the chapter maintains that "if racial formation was distinct in varying context in the British Empire, race and racial difference were significant and constant categories throughout the British realms" and that in the West Indies and Britain, [British] subjects had to contend with specific racialized politics" (p. 13). Cantres's second claim is that West Indians, by their direction, transformed the metropolitan state by colouring the very concept of "British" identity. Drawing on the experiences of migrants in Britain, Chapter Four highlights West Indians' response to the Notting Hill race riots, which "were a watershed moment in the articulation of West Indian patterns of identification and resistance" (p. 67).

Lastly, *Blackening Britain's* third claim underscores resistance to the racial status quo in Britain derived from ingenious reconceptualization and reformations of Black activists and thinkers who moved away from their assumed status as loyal colonial subjects and later citizens toward

more revolutionary transgressive patterns of identification and mobilization. Chapter 5 articulates the “emergence of a reframed perspective on the problems of racialization where Black people controlled the narratives of their presence in Britain” (p. 93). In this chapter, Cantres details West Indians’ grassroots mobilization in response to the Notting Hill riots through newspapers and various communications networks to organise forms of resistance – newspapers were their “tools to spread message and broaden their support base” (p. 100). Additionally, Cantres contends that the “processes of political radicalization were transatlantic, concomitant, and premised on burgeoning contemporaneous diasporic racial and political consciousness” (p. 103). Thus, *Blackening Britain* offers an agency-centred approach to migration as resistance to colonialism.

Despite the similarities between the works discussed above, the authors differ in their approach to "belonging." There are two ways that Birkenmaier's book addresses "belonging." The first looks at territorial belonging, discussed in Chapter 7, relating to U.S. colonialism and the perception of territory. It argues that “Colonialism complicate[s] the notion of territory by creating a short circuit between ownership and belonging and invites us to reimagine how territories as spaces of belonging are reconstituted from beneath and beyond imperial histories of military appropriation” (p. 119-120).

The second type of “belonging” addresses the attachment for the children of immigrants and those longing for a permanent return. For example, Chapter 10 tackles the “literal and figurative returns [...] and the recent surge of repatriation to Cuba” (p. 162). Per the discussion, “among those who have returned were [many who were] born in the U.S., which implies that traveling to a country about which the visitors have heard poignant stories in both the public and private arenas that foster a sense of identity and belonging” (p. 164). Still, as *Caribbean Migrations* demonstrates, the sense of “belonging” concerning coloniality is attached to disputed notions of legality and invites readers to come to terms with what “belonging” means when it is tied up in legal understandings of territories and borders.

Contrastingly, Cantres's articulation of “belonging” for West Indians illustrates how colonialism and belonging are in opposition. In Chapter 1 of *Blackening Britain*, Cantres situates the Caribbean's relationship with Britain, suggesting that “the cultural dominance of Imperial Britain over the Caribbean was an effective lure for many migrants where the strong association with Britain persisted” (p. 4). Nevertheless, Chapter 3 insists that “pervasive attitudes on race [...] trumped West Indians’ claims to national or imperial belonging” (p. 46). Furthermore, Cantres links this negotiating of Black space and belonging to the Notting Hill Riots, a “watershed moment in the articulation of West Indian patterns of identification and

resistance in the U.K. were emblematic of the threat of everyday violence, discrimination, and disruptions” (p. 67). Here, we see Britishness being contested not only by West Indian migrants but also native Britons who are challenging the belonging of their West Indian counterparts. Hence, *Blackening Britain* illustrated that “belonging” and identity formation are embedded and contested in the Caribbean’s relationship with its former colonizer and that navigating this sense of belonging is rooted in perceptions about origin, race, and legality.

## Conclusion

Birkenmaier and Cantres demonstrate how Caribbean migrants challenged long-held views of national identity and belonging. Each book offers an agency-centred discussion of how migrants and nomads resist colonial perceptions of identity and belonging. In Birkenmaier’s view, the decision to migrate or remain is equally influenced by the individual and conditions in the “sending” and “receiving” societies. Cantres expands this perspective by demonstrating how non-Hispanic Caribbean migrants’ resistance to British conformity alters what it means to be “British.” These texts add to the ongoing research and discussion on migrant agency, especially notions of belonging and contestation rooted in colonialism. Thus, *Caribbean Migrations’* and *Blackening Britain’s* emphasis on agency moves away from the perspective of migrants being “acted upon” and underscores how migration itself can be an act of resistance concerning manifestations of coloniality.

A concern with both authors might be that neither took the time to define what the Caribbean means and may have assumed that there is a shared understanding of how we define the region. The conceptualization of the Caribbean, including its past and current colonial affiliations, imaginary lines, economic and trading, and geographical experiences of African, Asian, and European descendants, makes “the Caribbean” a challenging concept to define. Hence, given the lack of consensus on what constitutes the Caribbean seemed like a missed opportunity. Birkenmaier’s work has an extensive focus on migration and nomadism in Puerto Rico, and for good reason, but by not defining what is meant by the Caribbean, the addition of countries like Jamaica and Haiti seemed forced given the extensive discussion on Spanish-speaking Caribbean experiences. Cantres, on the other hand, uses “West Indian” and “Caribbean” interchangeably, despite their distinct definitions. While these minor slights do not change the importance of the discussion in the respective books, that are noticeable enough.

The books leave a lingering question about the future of research on migration in the Caribbean now that many of these Caribbean nations are actively cutting ties with their

current and former colonial powers. For example, Barbados has actively renounced its commonwealth connections to Britain, with various other Caribbean nations hoping to follow suit. Puerto Rico, for example, could move from a territory to a state by the end of this year. How might these changes affect the relationships between former and current colonies regarding movement, identity formation, resistance, and coloniality across the Caribbean?

What makes *Caribbean Migrations* and *Blackening Britain* such significant contributions to the study of migration, colonialism, transnationalism, identity formation, and the Caribbean is how their respective work not only adds to existing knowledge of research in the region but also provides a particularly unique approach to such a conversation. Both books are great additions to undergraduate and graduate courses that explore any topics previously discussed and other research related to resistance and radicalization. Not only are these books an insightful addition to a course syllabus, but the topics explored and emphasized warrant the attention of scholars interested in the Caribbean. They are also for the “non-scholars” who are migrants and nomads themselves and have a first-hand account of the impacts of colonialism and being from a geographic region that is a “permanent periphery.” Thus, the perspectives and approaches to *Caribbean Migrations* and *Blackening Britain* ensure that the region remains a relevant and central focus of migration research in the social sciences and that the collective voices of migrants’ lived experiences remain vital to such research endeavours.

## Bibliography

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