

Windrush Poets

1) Starter activity, leave your thoughts on the photographs

Place photos around the space of the Windrush ship, advert for travel, nhs staff etc. and write thoughts/reactions/descriptions on post-its to attach to photos

2) Introduce the theme: Windrush

At the end of the Second World War, Britain was busy rebuilding. The government was thinking about recruiting workers from the Caribbean to cope with the shortage of labour in some British industries. In 1948, an advertisement appeared in a Jamaican newspaper. It stated that there were 300 places on board Windrush for anyone wishing to travel to Britain.

When the ship departed on 24th May, all 300 places were taken. An extra 192 men made the voyage on the deck. Many had served with the Allied Forces in the war. Some wished to rejoin the armed services. Others hoped for better career prospects in Britain, since there was high unemployment at home.

The ship landed at Tilbury docks on 21st June. The Civil Service sent a black officer, Ivor Cummings, to meet the new arrivals. It was a big problem finding them somewhere to live. As a short-term measure, the Colonial Office was forced to house 230 Windrush settlers in a deep air raid shelter in Clapham Common. The nearest labour exchange to the shelter was Brixton. As a result, many of the settlers set up home there, making it one of Britain's first Caribbean communities.

There was plenty of work available in Britain, mostly labouring jobs in the big cities. Black Caribbeans were generally shut out of higher-paid jobs, especially those that were heavily unionised. However, the public sector offered them reasonably well-paid work, for example in hospitals, the General Post Office, London Transport and the railways.

The arrival of the Windrush was the start of a period of migration from the Caribbean to Britain that did not slow down until 1962. By 1955, 18,000 Jamaicans had moved to Britain. This outward flow of people to settle in Britain was an important event in the history of the West Indies. It also changed the social landscape of Britain.

3) Introduce the poet:

John Agard

Poet, performer, anthologist, John Agard was born in Guyana and came to Britain in 1977. = He has written lots about what it was like to leave home and the history of the Caribbean, as well as telling stories of his childhood and the myths and legends of Guyana. As a touring speaker with the Commonwealth Institute, he visited nearly 2000 schools promoting Caribbean culture and poetry, and has performed on television and around the world. In 1993 he was appointed Writer in Residence at the Southbank Centre, London, and became Poet in Residence at the BBC in London, an appointment created as part of a scheme run by the Poetry Society. He also played a key role in the 'Windrush' season of programmes in 1998. John lives with his wife, poet Grace Nichols, in Lewes.

4) Perform and interpret the poem:

Windrush child

Behind you

Windrush child

palm trees wave goodbye

above you
Windrush child
seabirds asking why

around you
Windrush child
blue water rolling by

beside you
Windrush child
your Windrush mum and dad

think of storytime yard
and mango mornings

and new beginnings
doors closing and opening

will things turn out right?
At least the ship will arrive
in midsummer light

and you Windrush child
think of Grandmother
telling you don't forget to write

and with one last hug
walk good walk good
and the sea's wheel carries on spinning

and from that place England
you tell her in a letter
of your Windrush adventure

stepping in a big ship
not knowing how long the journey
or that you're stepping into history

bringing your Caribbean eye
to another horizon
Grandmother's words your shining beacon

learning how to fly
the kite of your dreams
in an English sky

Windrush child
walking good walking good
in a mind-opening
meeting of snow and sun

5) Pick out the technicalities:

Do you like the poem – for what reason? Which phrases stand out and why? What techniques have been used? What is the effect?

6) Discuss our stories of migration:

Have we ourselves migrated? Do we know other people who have been on similar journeys? Have our grandparents done similar journeys?

7) Have a go at writing our own poetry

8) Extra time, introduce the poet:

Professor Laura Serrant

Read and interpret the poem:

YOU CALLEDAND WE CAME

You called...and we came.
In ships bigger than anything we had seen,
dwarfing our islands and covering them
in the shadows of smoke and noise.
Crowded, excited voices filled the air,
traveling to the 'motherland'
– over weeks, over oceans that threatened to engulf us.
Driven by a wish, a call to save, to rebuild
and support efforts to establish 'health for all'
in the aftermath of war.

You called....and we came.
Women and men of position in our homelands;
nurses with a pride in the excellence of our care.
With experience of management, organisation
and a sense of duty.
We appeared.
Smiling and eager to work on the wards, communities and clinics
of this England.

You called....and we came.
Our big hearts, skilful hands and quick minds
encased in our skins – of a darker hue.
Which had shimmered and glowed
in our sunnier climes..
But now signified our difference

– our un-belonging.
Matrons became assistants
Nurses became like chambermaids.
All the while striving to fulfil our promise
– to succour, to serve, to care.

You called....and we came.
The blue of the sister's uniform
– seemed as far away from us as the moon.
Unreachable by our dark hands in this cold land.
But we were made of sterner stuff.
The hot sun, which once beat down on our ancestors,
when they too left their lands,
Shone within us.
Forging our hearts and minds
with the resistance of Ebony.

You called....and we came.
Rising like the Phoenix ,
from the heat of rejection.
We cared, we worked and we organised.
Until the quickness of our brains
and the excellence of our care
made it hard for you to contain us.
And slowly, so slowly,
the blue uniforms had dark and lighter bodies beneath them.
The professional care in our touch
was valued despite the strangeness of our speech
and the kinks in our hair.

You called....and we came.
A new millennium – new hopes spread across this land.
New populations, engaging and reflecting
the varied, diverse and vibrant nature of these shores.
Challenging and reflecting on leadership for health.
Moves to melt the 'snow' at the peaks of our profession.
Recognising the richness of our kaleidoscope nation.
Where compassion, courage and diversity are reflected
In our presence and our contribution:
Not only the hopes and dreams of our ancestors.
– Human values needed to truly lead change...and add value.
Remember... you called.
Remember... you called
YOU. Called.
Remember, it was us, who came.