

Invisible Gates Made Visible in Trinidad and Tobago: Projected and Sanctified Violence by the Liberal State upon Illegal immigrants and Refugees

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Over the past decade, illegal immigrants from other countries, especially those from Venezuela, to the Anglophone Caribbean territories such as Trinidad and Tobago have increased (Chaves-Gonzalez and Echeverria-Estrada 2020: 1). The extent of this illegal immigration to this country is clearly illuminated in the statistics provided. Trinidad and Tobago as of May 2023 received 35.3 thousand Venezuelan illegal immigrants (IOM Global Crisis Response Platform 2022). With the concern to protect national and economic interests, the debate on securing the rights and privileges of illegal immigrants in this Trinidad and Tobago, has been increasingly pushed to the forefront. So, too, has the discussion on the relationship between those prejudicial migration policies and the form of sanctified violence inflicted on these illegal migrants.

Ironically, the idea of this dialogue is never actually pushed in the direction of improving immigration policies since Trinidad and Tobago lacks an immigration legislation for illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. Even though Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, it nevertheless has not been integrated into local legislation. A draft 'National Policy to Address Refugee and Asylum Matters', however, was adopted in 2014 but has not been legalized. Protection for asylum seekers and refugees is thus limited. Moreover, migrants and refugees to Trinidad and Tobago are treated under the 1976 Immigration Act. It is a law which lacks provisions to deal with asylum seekers and refugees and does not address their particular vulnerabilities and needs. Consequently, the situation for asylum seekers and refugees seeking protection in Trinidad and Tobago is dire, including tremendous xenophobia towards Venezuelans. This is even promoted by statements by government officials who brand them as illegal immigrants (Advocates for Human Rights 2021).

There are calls for a viable solution to the discrimination of illegal immigrants. Amnesty International recommended to Trinidad and Tobago that there should be an

implementation of immigration legislation in order to diminish specific human rights violations faced by asylum seekers, especially those fleeing Venezuela and in need of international protection (Amnesty International 2021: 12). Other significant organisations such as The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have also urged Trinidad and Tobago to support the authorities' efforts to ensuring protection of all Venezuelan immigrants (IOM Global Crisis Response Platform 2022). However, the scarcity of responses by the Trinidad and Tobago government to offer a resolution to this injustice have caused a number of migration scholars to conclude that these states have all failed to protect the rights of migrants. Melanie Teff, a migration scholar, claims that Trinidad and Tobago 'lacks a migration policy and its existing migration law fails to afford individuals adequate rights and privileges' (Teff 2019: 4) A similar version of this argument is highlighted by international relations scholar Michelle Reis, who affirms that Trinidad and Tobago is on the threshold of a humanitarian crisis due to the influx of thousands of Venezuelan refugees and that Trinidad's government is now implementing a tougher line towards the newcomers (Reis, cited in Otis 2018).

These calls to the predicament of migrants in the modern liberal state such as Trinidad and Tobago are enlightening, but only offer a limited account and do not take onboard the more problematic implications that issue from a lack of migration policies that clearly perpetuates both discrimination and violence towards refugees. What is needed is a move from this restricted focus of protecting the basic human rights of all migrants to an in-depth theoretical account validating both the root causes of this lack of protection and possible resolutions. This essay therefore chooses to focus on the work of Wilson Harris (1999), the British Guyanese theorist and fiction writer, whose theory of migration offers considerable attention to those invisible barriers that suddenly erupt to protect economic, political and social interests of the host countries. In its sensitivity to the problems of both migrants and host nations, this theory points the way towards an intellectually sound interpretation. The rationale of his theory rests with its appeal to the effort to overcome these obstacles through working out a sustainable notion of an effective migration policy rather than with an immediate transformation of the injustices experienced by migrants.

This article begins by outlining the basic premises of Harris's theory of migration that ushers in a new dialogue about the reality of migrants to Trinidad and Tobago. Among the Caribbean countries of Aruba, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic and Guyana that are affected by Venezuelan immigration, this essay chooses to focus on Trinidad and Tobago. This focus on Trinidad and Tobago is, in part, motivated by its overall lack of a refugee policy. This essay will also continue by suggesting that there could be a sustainable migration legislation that is broad enough to embrace both migrants and at the same time protect the national, economic, political and social interests of Trinidad and Tobago.

This research proceeds with an account of Guyanese fiction writer and theorist Wilson Harris's use of the terms 'authoritarian paradiso' and the 'tormented monolith.' Then, it will discuss the relevance of these terms within the immigration laws of the modern democratic state of Trinidad and Tobago. Harris articulates the term 'authoritarian paradiso' in his theoretical essay 'The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination' (Harris 1999: 250), a term that brings into play the ultimate and incorrigible cemented fears and biases towards migrants by the institutional life of a democratic state. Harris develops the term from Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (1320), in which Virgil is barred from paradiso because he comes from a pre-Christian pagan age. Virgil's exclusion from the paradiso raises pivotal – however disguised – questions about the prejudices exhibited towards migrants in the modern world. At the end of the twentieth century Harris affirms that the authoritarian paradiso is an authoritarian texture that is hidden underneath legal codes that preserve cultural, economic and racial divisions between citizens and refugees. The authoritarian paradiso is prime corollary to the exposure of biased migrant laws in many developed and developing countries. Such a notion is reflected in Harris's essay 'Profiles of Myth and the New World'. It is Harris's observation that such implicit laws:

harden into ... projected violence by the state upon others to preserve stereotypical purities. The stranger is targeted, the foreigner is targeted, the refugee is targeted, as impure. Such targets reflect consent [and] the projection of violence, sanctified violence, upon others. At the heart of such perverse consent lies ... a conviction that we have cemented subconsciously or unconsciously into our prized institutions, the conviction of stereotypical and absolute purity that may affect the nature of citizenship in some nation-states. The tragedy is that all of us- whatever our intellectual and surface persuasion, liberal, democratic, fascist are influenced at some level in ourselves by the charisma of our institutions, the sacrosanct territory of our institutions.

A notable example of the 'authoritarian paradiso' in the Caribbean would be the lack of a national refugee policy in Trinidad and Tobago. It is this lack of a refugee law in its statute books that grants further subversion of Trinidad and Tobago's signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol to respect the rights of asylum seekers. Hence, Trinidad and Tobago's authoritarian paradiso only perpetuates a superficial and illusory commitment to international convention. Moreover, the country's archaic 1976 Immigration Act is primarily a law enforcement piece of legislation that also lacks a humanitarian law-based approach.

Further to this, Trinidad and Tobago's draft 'National Policy to Address Refugee and Asylum Matters' that was adopted in 2014 has not even been enacted into law and thus protection is limited for asylum seekers and refugees. Significantly, the 'authoritarian texture' of these superficial immigration policies has reared its menacing nature as refugees in Trinidad and Tobago in 2019 and 2020 carrying asylum certificates and identification cards from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) were deported back to their homeland where they could possibly face persecution (Advocates for Human Rights 2021)

It can certainly be argued that Trinidad and Tobago occupies an ambiguous position in its approach to handling illegal immigration with regard to its present immigration policies that breach international conventions of human rights. That ambiguity, according to Harris, makes Trinidad and Tobago a 'tormented monolith' (Harris 1999: 99). In his essay, 'The Schizophrenic Sea', Harris uses this phrase, 'tormented monolith', to refer to the nation state that experiences a 'difficulty in relinquishing a conviction of territorial conscription of moral imperative' and the subsequent 'implicit polarizations such order engenders between outsiders and insiders, minority and majority cultures' (Harris 1999, 99). The arguably schizophrenic handling of Venezuelan migrants by Trinidad and Tobago's government also helps one to perceive the hidden authoritarian paradiso conditioned by a masquerade of stultified migration policies. In accordance with Harris's claims about the authoritarian paradiso and the tormented monolith, one can clearly situate the illegal immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago, within a space which insists upon discrimination and violence. The language of both the authoritarian paradiso and the tormented monolith therefore withdraws from the communication of mutuality, justice, and equity and at the end of the day even from the category of humanitarianism.

However, the absence of refugee policies that clearly undermines a human rights dimension has aroused local organisations in Trinidad and Tobago to publicly address the country's partial immigration laws. As such, the Trinidad and Tobago's Emancipation Committee has called to prevent this injustice, emerging at a time when it is established as the norm and evokes a situation of extreme abuse. The prejudiced nature of the country's immigration law towards Venezuelan refugees has been compared with other immigrant groups by the Emancipation Committee chairman Khafra Kambon. As Kambon puts it:

We are seeing two trends in the conversation coming, especially from the Minister of National Security, who keeps linking undocumented migrants with crime ... We feel there should be equality of treatment for everyone. We can say, without any fear of contradiction, because the evidence is there. (Singh 2020)

The importance of Kambon's remark should not be underestimated. One may initially gather that one of Kambon's prime assertions is that the current immigration policies are vague, obsolete and a mere contrivance. However, his point is crucial here since it exposes the prejudicial contents of Trinidad and Tobago's immigration policy. He not only highlights its biased style of legislation but clearly calls for a liberation from its more monolithic structure, but clearly suggests that, in order to overcome the dangerous implications of discrimination initiated by the paradoxes of Wilson's concepts of authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith, there must be real and

viable solutions. Such a capacity to recognize the sealed and stifled reports of violence and discrimination towards immigrants reveals a faint fissure or breach in the authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith which may subsequently lead to the first thread of conversion of strict migrancy codes.

The fallacy of Trinidad and Tobago's 1976 archaic immigration law may be clear perhaps to the impartial mind which wrestles with de facto situations. However, there is also a rationale or ideology within such obsolete immigration laws that are committed to a purist nationalist logic that unwittingly disregard calls for an end to discrimination of illegal immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago. In part, this disregard represents the preservation of a nation's limited physical space and resources. Such immigration laws are necessary for a country's national interests but they need to come into equation with basic human rights. This claim of a purist nationalist logic is reflected in the following statement made by Keith Rowley, the current Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, in 2019 towards the influx of illegal immigrants from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago. As Rowley outlines:

As a government we have the responsibility to protect the interests of the people of Trinidad and Tobago first and foremost. Whatever we feel about the people of Venezuela and their circumstances, our first and primary responsibility is to protect the interests of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Initially we allowed our doors to be open. Venezuelans came here could spend 90 days and go back and that's been going on and as things get a little worse, more have come and we kept our doors open. But there comes a time when the volume and the presence of these economic migrants in T&T will threaten the quality of life of the people of T&T and it falls to us to protect ourselves from that. (Loop News 2019)

In his response, the Rowley clearly makes manifest the deeper ethical-political aspects of the authoritarian paradiso and the tormented monolith syndromes. In the above excerpt, Rowley demonstrates that the liberal state automatically responds to protect its national interests once it experiences an increased fear of the stranger and foreigner and therefore reacts to this challenge in a most uncompromising manner. While he admits that the resources of Trinidad and Tobago need to be protected, Rowley also rejects the possibility of altering the country's present immigration policies. For Trinidad and Tobago, the continuity of these immigration laws rests with the fact that it lends voice to possible acts of discrimination and violence. The country's judicial system may not do this in a way that is explicit, but in accordance with its present immigration policies it nonetheless enforces and brings to light those predictable invisible gates. For instance, Amnesty International reported that in 2020 that Trinidad and Tobago's authorities forced 286 refugees in need of international protection back to Venezuela (Amnesty International 2021: 7).

The possibility that Trinidad and Tobago's rigid immigration laws will not be altered in the foreseeable future brings into play the following crucial question: Is it possible

to penetrate and re-vision the authoritarian texture of Trinidad and Tobago's immigration law? A capacity to divest the seal of the authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith could become reality. However, this may prove to be a difficult task since the fears and biases of Trinidad and Tobago's government towards the stranger, the foreigner and the refugee are deeply enshrined within its immigration policies. Moreover, if the authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith within the country's immigration laws remain intact, then any call by an outspoken public to revise such laws become blocked and flattened. Subsequently, the future influx of migrants to this country is destined to be locked into a limbo of impurity.

Perhaps the future democratic state could arrive at a juncture where a complex modification in its archaic immigration laws will be visualized and implemented. However, a conversion of such laws needs to be formulated to protect both the rights of citizens and migrants. The result may not only represent a fissure in the hubris of the authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith, but also the creation of that cross-cultural space where 'gifts' from 'one culture' are 'unselfconsciously' offered to 'another culture' (Harris 1999: 242). These 'gifts' such as assurance of basic human rights, may prove helpful in bridging the particularly complex relationship between a country's preservation of its national interests with the apparently absent laws that should protect the basic rights of migrants. What this research is driving at in this proposed immigration policy, is the idea of a synthesis that transcends issues of fear, violence and marginalization for both migrants and citizens.

However, such a solution may be deemed inadequate to the economic aspirations of Trinidad and Tobago. It may be deemed too idealistic and a conception that works only in the direction of the utopian setting. Instead, what is needed for this possible immigration legislation to manifest is for Trinidad and Tobago to recognize that its immigration crises present a non-materialistic aspect of reality: namely, humanity. Even if this solution may be viewed as idealistic, it still anticipates an effort to rekindle a society of mutual existence. Hence, for democratic societies like Trinidad and Tobago, there is indeed a way to save its national interests without resorting to an open and practical notion of hostility. This proposed immigration paradigm is a particularly promising starting-point to cater for both migrants and citizens. In presenting this cross-cultural solution, one discloses an idea of a policy that is more accommodating than the present migration legislation of Trinidad and Tobago. One that certainly evades every reference to homogeneity as well as fanaticism associated with a purist national logic.

Wilson Harris's theories are of interest a wide audience that spans the traditional distinction between European and Caribbean epistemologies. Yet one of the most complex and important aspects of his work – his engagement with the discrimination of immigrants to democratic countries – has received comparatively little attention. This essay has demonstrated that Harris's theoretical views of migration in the contemporary world are integral to the discussion of discrimination and violence

inflicted on illegal immigrants and its implications in liberal states in the Anglophone Caribbean, particularly Trinidad and Tobago. While this essay cannot provide an exhaustive and in-depth discussion of Harris's theory of the authoritarian paradiso and the tormented monolith in relation to contemporary migration politics, it nevertheless provides a lens through which the nuances of migration challenges in the liberal state may be highlighted. This valuable contribution resides in his suggestion that violence projected on illegal immigrants in democratic countries is substantiated by reference to a sense of rationality and morality found in the invisible gates within immigration laws even if this means that the basic human rights of the stranger and foreigner are sacrificed.

This essay also claims that a failure to take into account the elements of authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith within immigration policies leads to a misunderstanding of the most pressing problem of illegal immigration in Anglophone Caribbean territories: the tension between the commitment to establishing subtle and harsh migration polices that inflict sanctified violence on migrants in order to protect national interests, on the one hand, and the masquerade of equity and fairness practices towards migrants, on the other. The relationship between the authoritarian paradiso and the tormented monolith within the immigration laws of democratic societies is itself a complex issue. First, by basing its reasons on the idea of protecting economic, political and social interests, the liberal state not only provides a narrow account of its immigration problems, but also defends a rather static understanding of its immigration laws and fails to account for the injustices experienced by migrants. Within this context, Wilson Harris's notions of the authoritarian paradiso and tormented monolith could be utilized in providing an understanding to the current migration crises experienced in the modern democratic state of Trinidad and Tobago.

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