

Biocitizenship and forced removals

- 20th Jul 2018



copyright: David Mirzoeff/Global Justice Now



Author :

Chris Simms

Chris Simms is an Assistant Professor in the School of Health Administration, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada

There are researchers, including in the global health sphere, who have an interest in how lack or loss of power gets into the body and causes physical illness and mental anguish.

[Farmer](#) (and others) have looked at questions of citizenship, power, and rights in the context of colonialism, a telling and far-reaching example of such disempowerment. They

embrace the notion of biocitizenship—a concept that considers the ways access to limited social goods mediates the relationship between citizens and state, and helps define who “belongs” (as citizen) and who does not. This notion of biocitizenship provides a useful lens to interrogate how forced removals of established families and communities affect well-being.

A [report](#) from May 2018 by the think-tank Oakland Institute describes the burning of homes and uprooting of tens of thousands of Masai in Tanzania to make way for foreign-owned tourism development. [Studies](#) by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) show that the World Bank, sometimes failing to adhere to its own guidelines, funds projects that uproot communities—more than [3 million](#) people over a 10 year period. Some forced removals harken back to colonial and post-colonial periods—for example, the resettlement of millions of Tanzanians in the 1960s and 1970s into 2500 villages, the uprooting of 1.2 million [Kenyans](#), 2.5 million Algerians (1952-63) or millions of people from District 6 in apartheid South Africa (1960-83). These tragedies typically present as humanitarian crises and victims consistently speak of extreme anxiety, sadness, and anger.

A striking example of a forced removal policy which has drawn international attention is the still evolving British political crisis known as the [Windrush scandal](#). In [2010](#), in response to rising levels of nativism, the British Home Office launched its draconian immigration campaign which became known in 2012 as its “[hostile environment](#)” policy. Designed to reduce the number of illegal immigrants, it forced landlords, employers, banks and NHS services to run immigration status checks on those, in effect, “who looked like or sounded like immigrants”. The 2016 Immigration Act gave landlords the right to evict tenants who could not prove their citizenship. Caught up in this initiative were citizens known as the Windrush generation, immigrants from the Caribbean (and elsewhere) who had arrived between 1948 and 1971 and given leave to remain in 1971. Because they often lacked official documentation and the Home Office had destroyed their stored landing cards in 2010, they had difficulty proving their legal status. Thousands were deported or threatened with deportation, many lost access to social goods and employment and most suffered anxiety. Unconscionably, the government [knew](#) of these injustices as early as 2013 and ignored them.

The destruction of Windrush landing cards (despite clear warnings they were vital to establishing legal status) seems to symbolize loss of biocitizenship. Indeed, a multitude of recorded interviews of Windrush victims show the impact of lost access to [healthcare](#) and other [social goods](#) as well as a sense of alienation, “unbelonging”, betrayal and anguish associated with separation from family. For some, these losses would evoke a life as a colonial subject, living without status or agency, without biocitizenship, in a region where race-based access to health and social services was a key incentive for [independence](#) .

With its “hostile environment”, the British Home Office has linked current policy with its colonial past, parts of which officialdom had made every effort to suppress. Like most European colonial history, it is top-down, incomplete and therefore inaccurate. Archived

material consists almost exclusively of military and administrative documentation, absent the [voices](#) of ordinary persons. It is selective: the [destruction](#), disappearance, or ferreting away of embarrassing or unwanted colonial records is not unusual. What the Home Office has managed to resurrect and bring to the fore is a [Caribbean](#) history, one based on slavery (the importation of 1.6 million slaves)—egregious, profound exploitation across centuries. Only an extraordinary lack of mindfulness of the past and preoccupation with satisfying nativist sentiments could allow this to happen.

The Windrush scandal is now part of colonial history that historians report they want to write from the [inside out](#), as a “history of emotion”. They have begun to focus on the “hostile environment” policy as one explicitly aimed at creating anxiety among immigrant populations. They will focus on those of the Windrush generation that were presented with NHS bills, refused social assistance, evicted from their homes, refused re-entry into the country; on families surprised by their loss of power, right, and citizenship. Inevitably, historians will link the promotion of nativist sentiments beginning in 2010 to the anti-immigration rhetoric and rise of nationalism and will conclude both were ill-judged and shameful.