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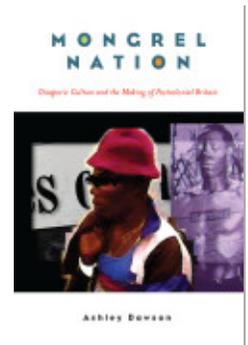
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Black Power in a Transnational Frame

Radical Populism and the Caribbean Artists Movement

AFTER TAKING THE STAGE AT THE ROUND HOUSE IN NORTH LONDON, Stokely Carmichael (aka Kwame Ture) asked the audience to rise and remain silent for a moment in memory of John Coltrane, who had died the previous day.¹ Into the silence created by this commemoration of the great jazz musician and “cultural warrior,” Carmichael proceeded to pour words more combustible than gasoline. The “Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation” whose stage he occupied had, according to the Trinidad-born leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), little relevance either for black struggle in the United States or for the oppressed masses around the world with which the movement identified. How could a conference organized around the notion of *individual* alienation, Carmichael asked, shed any light on the circumstances of black people, who are exploited and despised *as a class*?² Convened in July 1967 by a group of radical psychiatrists that included R. D. Laing, the “Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation” aimed to link “the internalized violence said to be characteristic of psychotic mental illness with the mentality which fuelled the US war in Vietnam.”³ The congress, in other words, was intended to extend the New Left’s exploration of the cultural components of hegemony in late capitalism, and featured, among others, Frankfurt School luminary Herbert Marcuse discoursing on the manufacturing of ersatz needs in

the consumer society.⁴ By reducing oppression to a purely psychological level, however, the congress organizers unwittingly directed attention away from the institutional character of racial inequality and imperialism. Carmichael, one of the only black people invited to attend the congress, offered a blunt reminder of the parochial character of the British Left at a time when, with the Vietnam War heating up and the U.S. ghettos on fire, questions of international solidarity should have been paramount.⁵

For the members of Britain's black community in attendance at the congress, Carmichael's words were electrifying. Barbadian-born poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite later wrote that the speech was one of the most important moments of the decade. For Brathwaite, Carmichael's words "magnetized a whole set of splintered feelings that had for a long time been seeking a node."⁶ Carmichael's speech, that is, transformed the isolation experienced by intellectuals such as Brathwaite by limning the material and cultural connections between members of the black diaspora and the colonized peoples of the Third World. According to Brathwaite, Carmichael "enunciated a way of seeing the Black West Indian that seemed to many to make sense of the entire history of slavery and colonial suppression, of the African diaspora in the New World."⁷ Like previous Pan-Africanist activists, Stokely Carmichael offered his audience a transnational perspective that transformed them from an isolated and outnumbered national minority to an integral part of a militant global majority. For Brathwaite, this unifying perspective meant not only that "a Black international was possible," but also that "links of sympathy . . . were set up between laboring immigrant, artist/intellectual, and student."⁸ Black Power thus overcame the alienation of displaced West Indian writers such as Brathwaite by simultaneously reviving a heritage of transnational solidarity and by grounding intellectuals in the rich cultural traditions of communities throughout the black diaspora.⁹

The resonance of Stokely Carmichael's black nationalism suggests that a transatlantic *convergence* of diasporic politics and culture took place during the late 1960s.¹⁰ Elective affinities that developed between diasporic communities during this period, however, were significantly different from the idealist return to African roots that characterized previous waves of Pan-African mobilization.¹¹ While these affinities were elicited by a common experience of racial slavery and capitalism

that linked the continents abutting the black Atlantic, there were specific historical and material conditions that stimulated black nationalism's transatlantic resonance during this period. The Black Power movement has commonly been represented as arising in the United States during the late 1960s with a revolt against the implicit self-abnegation that oriented the integrationist leadership of the civil rights movement.¹² Militant leaders such as Carmichael and, most famously, Malcolm X, refused to surrender their own cultural traditions in order to gain admission to the stratified class society of the U.S. mainstream. Instead, they insisted on their prerogative to power on their own terms. This demand was truly threatening, for it promised to transform U.S. culture on a fundamental level, as the integrationist tenets of the civil rights movement never had.

In Britain, by contrast, there was no significant national civil rights movement by the late 1960s.¹³ In addition, while Britain lacked the tradition of pervasive racial terror that characterized the United States, during the course of imperial expansion it had developed a potent pedagogical apparatus in the colonies that emphasized the benefits of cultural assimilation for the colonized.¹⁴ When members of the Commonwealth nations migrated to Britain, however, they quickly found that the notions of British fair play they'd absorbed from the colonial education apparatus were pure fiction. In addition to experiencing institutional racism in housing, employment, and education, black immigrants also witnessed the passage of a series of patently racist immigration laws in the course of the 1960s that dramatically undermined the mythical notion of universal British subjecthood. In one watershed decade, Britain thus moved from putatively accepting post-colonial immigrants with open arms to codifying explicitly biased laws designed to exclude all nonwhite British citizens from residence in the "motherland."

Shorn of their illusions by dint of bitter experience in the postimperial metropolis, black Britons were primed for Stokely Carmichael's militant insistence on self-definition and transnational black solidarity. Yet Carmichael's message of black autonomy was contradicted, to a certain extent, by the "telescope effect," which led many black Britons to look to the antiracist movement in the United States as a vanguard.¹⁵ The role of the U.S. struggle as a model is made particularly apparent by the strong impact of visits to Britain by American leaders such as Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Carmichael, each of whom stimulated significant institutional and ideological transformation in the movement for racial equality in Britain. If, as Carmichael emphasized, cultural autonomy was key to political self-reliance, surely this ideal should militate against dependence on other black nationalisms as much as it applied to mimicry of white culture. In fact, the cultural traditions of black Britons differed significantly from those of African-Americans, despite the common matrix of racial oppression out of which cultures of solidarity sprang in the Black Power era. As a result, the political culture of Black Power was articulated along parallel but significantly different lines in Britain and the United States.¹⁶ To put it another way, while important transatlantic convergences took place under the aegis of Black Power during the late 1960s and early 1970s, these forms of solidarity were not simply examples of cultural and political mimicry, but rather instances of what Edward Kamau Brathwaite at the time called *inter/culturation*—“unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relations” that transformed the putatively authentic and autonomous signs of transnational black cultural solidarity based on local needs and cultures.¹⁷

Stokely Carmichael’s visit to Britain provides a clear example of such local appropriation of Black Power discourse. Although the absence of a significant British civil rights movement helped generate radical, nonintegrationist sentiment at the grass roots, the specific character of Britain’s “colonization in reverse” after 1948 shaped the character of this militancy, as Carmichael was to find out. Before delivering his speech at the congress, Carmichael was introduced to Michael Abdul Malik, a fellow Trinidadian and founder of the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS), Britain’s first Black Power organization. Abdul Malik, popularly known as Michael X since becoming a confidant of Malcolm X during the latter’s visit to Britain in 1965, was, like his mentor, an ex-hustler and consequently knew the British ghettos intimately.¹⁸ As Michael X escorted him around impoverished black communities, Carmichael was surprised to find that British Asians were just as galvanized by the Black Power movement as members of the African diaspora. Increasingly subject to violent attacks by members of the neo-fascist National Front, second-generation Asian youths, Michael X explained, were highly receptive to the Black Power message of self-defense. The recent visit of Muhammad Ali, who had heroically refused

to enlist for service in Vietnam, had made a particularly strong impression on Pakistani youths, according to Carmichael: "Here comes the heavyweight champion of all the world, Black, sassy, and lo and behold, a Muslim, like them, and royally kicking white butt all over the place."¹⁹

Britain's Black Power movement, then, although seemingly riding the coattails of developments in the United States, had a far more cross-cultural character at the grass roots than did its American counterpart. As Michael X explained to Stokely Carmichael, British racism was at no pains to distinguish between different immigrant groups, and, consequently, antiracism was developing along lines of multicultural solidarity rather than reactive ethnic specificity, as it tended to do in the United States.²⁰ In addition, since Britain's immigrant population was separated by no more than one generation from the experience of colonial domination, the anticolonial rhetoric that was such an integral aspect of Black Power's model of convergence had particular relevance in Britain. Indeed, struggles for independence, federation, and Black Power in the West Indies and elsewhere had an impact on the black community in Britain analogous to that of the Vietnam War in the United States. Of course, Britain's nonwhite population was numerically much smaller than that of the United States, and the convulsions caused in the body politic by antiracist mobilization were correspondingly less intense.²¹ Yet, despite its limitations, the Black Power movement in Britain offers a particularly powerful instance of diasporic internationalism as a result of the black community's relatively direct connections to antiracist and anticolonial movements in the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

Stokely Carmichael tapped these specifically black British reservoirs of anti-imperial sentiment during his blistering speech at the "Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation." Drawing on his youth in Trinidad, Carmichael recounted his experience of being forced to recite Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" in school. His main memory of this experience, Carmichael explained to his audience, was wishing that the white man would simply leave him the hell alone.²² If, as this anecdote suggests, the struggle for cultural integrity was a primary component of the Black Power movement, the lineaments of that autonomous culture were shaped by the particular processes of interculturalization that took place in specific nodes of the black Atlantic. In the Caribbean, power relations were determined not so much by the Manichaean

conflict between white and black (as they were in the United States) as by what Brathwaite called the *creole continuum* generated by a far more multiracial society, in which racial mixing was the norm rather than the exception.²³ Black nationalism in the Caribbean consequently pivoted less on notions of racial authenticity than on the tense relations between a metropolitan-identified neocolonial elite and the non-European culture of the subaltern masses.²⁴ This meant that the Pan-African theories that emerged from the Caribbean placed particular weight on recuperating the autonomous cultures of the region's popular classes rather than on simply opposing white hegemony.²⁵

If Stokely Carmichael's "Dialectics of Liberation" speech, for which he was declared *persona non grata* by Britain's supposedly socialist Labour government, offered a galvanizing political perspective on the black diaspora, Edward Kamau Brathwaite's public reading of his epic poem *Rights of Passage* three months earlier had a similarly dramatic impact on an aesthetic plane.²⁶ Like Carmichael, Brathwaite articulated a vision of black suffering and struggle that linked three continents. Brathwaite innovated not simply in terms of his thematic focus on the black diaspora in the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain, but also by using the vernacular speech forms of the black masses that he called *nation language*. Black political internationalism thus not only shaped artistic expression but was given concrete form through aesthetic experimentation such as Brathwaite's. While his work therefore shares much with antecedent and contemporary movements such as *negritude* and Black Arts, *Rights of Passage* is distinguished by its emphasis on distinctively Caribbean processes of interculturalization. Spawned by his extensive research into the history of creole culture in the Caribbean as well as his experience living on the three continents that surround the black Atlantic, Brathwaite's aesthetic of interculturalization not only escaped the ethnic essentialism that often characterized aesthetic work affiliated with black nationalism during the late 1960s, but also resonated particularly strongly with the cross-cultural character of Black Power in Britain. Grounded in the stratified creole societies of the Caribbean, Brathwaite's aesthetic is particularly suggestive today, when the successes of antiracist and anticolonialist movements of the 1960s have led many to believe that we are "beyond race" even while racially based disparities are intensifying both between the North and the South and within the overdeveloped nations.²⁷

CONVERGENCE AND AUTONOMY IN
BLACK POWER DISCOURSE

Five years before Stokely Carmichael addressed the “Dialectics of Liberation” conference, the political project of a federated West Indies collapsed. Set up by Britain in 1958 as a way of placating regional movements for independence, the West Indies Federation splintered in 1962 when the premier of Jamaica, Norman Manley, organized a referendum on secession. Passage of this referendum led to full independence for Jamaica; other relatively strong Caribbean nations such as Trinidad and Tobago followed quickly in Jamaica’s wake. Although this declaration of independence from Britain was significant, the death of the federation was, as the black British *West Indian Gazette* opined at the time, a retrograde step in hopes for political solidarity against the colonial powers.²⁸ As nations in Africa and the Caribbean gained their independence in the 1960s, the long-standing dream of Pan-African unity foundered on the shoals of uneven economic development and fissiparous regional politics. What grounds, then, did Black Power leaders such as Stokely Carmichael have for invoking notions of transnational black solidarity? Didn’t anticolonial nationalism around the world tend to undermine such claims to transnational unity? Was there any substance to the model of a convergence of interests between oppressed people in the metropolitan core and the peripheral colonized nations?²⁹

In his speech at the “Dialectics of Liberation” Congress, Stokely Carmichael focused not so much on the political vagaries of Pan-Africanism in Africa and elsewhere, as on analysis of the institutional forces that structured the lives of blacks living in the urban zones of the United States and Britain. It was in the forms of political, economic, and cultural dependency and disenfranchisement that characterized the ghettos in developed nations that Carmichael found a correspondence with colonial conditions around the world:

Now in the United States—and England isn’t far behind—it is estimated that in another five to ten years, two-thirds of the twenty million Black people who inhabit the United States will be living in the ghettos in the heart of the cities. Joining us are going to be hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and American Indians. The American city, in essence, is going to be

populated by peoples of the Third World, while the white middle classes will flee to the suburbs. Now the Black people do not control, nor do we own, the resources—we do not control the land, the houses, or the stores. These are all owned by whites who live outside the community. These are very real colonies, in the sense that they are capital and cheap labor exploited by those who live outside the cities.³⁰

At a moment when many white liberals were bemoaning the eclipse of nonviolent leaders in the civil rights movement, Carmichael reminds his listeners of the structural violence that produced racially polarized cities throughout the United States during the twentieth century.³¹ Like the apartheid system in South Africa, white supremacy in the United States and, he implies, the UK, effectively prevented the free movement of people of color in order to further the extraction of labor from this racialized industrial reserve army.³² Carmichael makes this analogy with South African apartheid explicit in *Black Power*, published the same year as his address at the “Dialectics of Liberation.”³³ South Africa is a particularly important point of comparison because, like other white settler colonies such as Australia and the United States, colonizer and colonized live in close geographical proximity. Of course, the correspondence between the United States and apartheid South Africa was not perfect. Carmichael admits that the decentralized, informal apartheid of the American system was significantly different from South Africa’s formal policies of apartheid, but this fact, he argues, renders conditions in the United States even more alarming since it underlines the organic continuities in white supremacy across the different geographical and political spaces of America.

Carmichael’s description of U.S. ghettos as internal colonies had a strong theoretical precedent, one that had, however, lain dormant for at least a generation as a result of the anti-Communist purges of the McCarthy era.³⁴ Carmichael’s theory of convergence harked back to analyses of imperialism developed by the global Communist movement during the interwar decades. During the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928, for example, a resolution was passed asserting that African-Americans in the southern states of the United States and Africans in South Africa constituted oppressed nations rather than racial minorities or majorities without power. As oppressed nations, American and South African blacks possessed an inherent right to self-

determination. The Comintern's position on black autonomy was the product of a series of debates earlier in the decade between Lenin and Indian Communist M. N. Roy.³⁵ For black revolutionaries such as George Padmore, the "black republic" scheme that resulted was a botched attempt to capture the remnants of the Garveyite movement in the United States.³⁶ Yet, despite the impracticalities of the "black republic" policy, in adopting Lenin's theses on black autonomy, the Comintern committed itself to supporting anticolonial and antiracist movements around the world during the late 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps equally importantly, it also lent the Communist Party's ideological validation to traditions of independent black revolutionary struggle *both* in developed nations such as the United States and throughout the colonial world. Blacks were seen as a vanguard whose struggles in the belly of the capitalist beast would awaken the rest of the proletariat and forge links with unfolding anticolonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.³⁷ As C. L. R. James argued in an address on Black Power delivered in August 1967, it was this tradition of connection between independent black struggles around the world that Stokely Carmichael and predecessors such as Malcolm X had revived.³⁸

James was particularly impressed to find that the Black Power struggles of the late 1960s adopted an inherently anticapitalist character. In *Black Power*, Carmichael argued that it is in the "objective relationship" between races rather than "rhetoric (such as constitutions *articulating* equal rights) or geography" that colonial relations could be discerned.³⁹ In pointing to the gap between the constitutional rhetoric of equal rights and entrenched material forms of racial inequality in the United States, Carmichael challenged an emerging normative narrative of the civil rights movement that emphasized a march toward racial progress.⁴⁰ In order to challenge the liberal outlook of some civil rights leaders, in other words, Carmichael adopted a historical materialist perspective that saw black oppression as a product of the inherently racial character of capitalism in the United States and elsewhere; as he put it during the "Dialectics of Liberation" conference, "A capitalist system automatically includes racism, whether by design or not."⁴¹ The American ghetto for Carmichael thus highlighted the limits of the "fictitious universalism" of the liberal-democratic nation-state and of antisystemic movements that adopted this entity as their horizon of possibility.⁴² While proclaiming itself a vehicle for universal equality, the liberal-democratic nation-state has been structured by and continues to perpetuate forms of racial dif-

ferentiation. The framework of black consciousness should not, then, be the liberal constitutional order of the United States but rather structures of racial oppression and resistance that operate on the transnational plane of historical capitalism.

Far from being undermined by black unrest in urban areas, the concessions granted to integrationist civil rights leaders, according to Carmichael, were superficial and would not transform the institutional racism that was responsible for urban uprisings. These concessions to middle-class leaders were analogous, Carmichael argued, with the indirect rule policies deployed by Britain and other colonial powers in order to decapitate resistance to foreign rule through the creation of a stratum of pliable indigenous leaders.⁴³ Leaders who capitulated to such co-optation, Carmichael argued bluntly, betrayed the black masses, whose lives would not be transformed by the granting of hollow civil rights and economic perquisites to a privileged elite. Carmichael's approach to the urban unrest of the late 1960s sought, in other words, to emphasize the extent to which these uprisings reflected class divisions *within* black communities as much as broader anger with the lack of social transformation in the wake of civil rights agitation.

In addition, in his "Dialectics of Liberation" address, Carmichael suggested that historical precedent underlined the unwillingness of the ruling classes to engage in significant internal reform. Thus, when challenged by the labor movement earlier in the century, the United States and other capitalist powers sought to bribe the white working class using the surplus created by imperial pillage rather than investing surplus in domestic reforms: "United States capitalists never cut down on their domestic profits to share with the workers—instead, they expanded internationally, and threw the crumbs from their profits to the American working class, who lapped them up. The American working class enjoys the fruits of the labors of the Third World workers. The proletariat has become the Third World, and the bourgeoisie is white Western society."⁴⁴ By generating surplus capital and jingoistic rhetoric, imperial expansion had effectively blunted the radical thrust of the white working class.⁴⁵ The internal colonies of the United States performed a similar economic and ideological function of binding together a cross-class white supremacist coalition. Yet if the class compromise that headed off revolutionary politics in liberal-democratic capitalist nations was built on the backs of internal and external colonies, the post-1945 era had witnessed large-scale rebellion by the oppressed at

both poles of this exploitative world system: the Third World and the ghettos of the advanced capitalist countries. The antiracist struggle in the United States was therefore integrally related to revolutionary anti-colonial struggles in the Third World.

For Carmichael, the ghettos were particularly strategic sites due to their proximity to the vital functions of the capitalist core:

The struggle to free these internal colonies relates to the struggles of imperialism around the world. We realistically survey our numbers, and know that it is not possible for Black people to take over the whole of the United States militarily, and hold large areas of land; in a highly industrialized nation, the struggle is different. The heart of production, and the heart of commercial trade, is in the cities. We are in the cities. We can become, and are becoming, a disruptive force in the flow of services, goods, and capital. While we disrupt internally and aim for the eye of the octopus, we are hoping that our brothers are disrupting externally to sever the tentacles of the United States.⁴⁶

Carmichael's assessment of the violent upheavals in cities such as Birmingham in 1963, New York in 1964, and Los Angeles in 1965 revived the Communist Party's "black republic" thesis, situating black efforts to assert self-control not in the so-called Black Belt region of the southern states as they had been during the 1930s but in the ghettos of urban America.⁴⁷ His analysis of the American ghetto as an internal colony anticipates the high-profile struggles of groups such as the Black Panthers to organize the black "lumpen-proletariat" and to establish traditions of autonomy among the urban black masses. The violent response of the state to such efforts, evident in the use of national guardsmen to quell urban riots and the COINTELPRO targeting of the Black Panthers, lent dramatic support to Carmichael's perception of a correspondence between external and internal colonies.⁴⁸

In hindsight, Carmichael's hopes for this revolutionary alignment against the "octopus" of imperialism seem tragically utopian. First of all, he and other radical activists of the era seriously underestimated the full power of state repression that would be leveled against those seeking to strike the eye of this octopus. In addition, over the next decade, a significant political realignment took place in which what Stuart Hall called "popular authoritarianism" would come to form the core of a

new, radically conservative hegemonic project in the United States and Britain.⁴⁹ As the axis of state power tipped increasingly toward explicit repression of dissenting elements of the population, so resources once devoted to securing consent would be progressively scaled back. Less than half a decade after Carmichael's speech, cities with substantial black populations like New York would pioneer neoliberal strategies such as the privileging of markets and the reorientation of government finance away from public services.⁵⁰ In Britain, a parallel process unfolded when the Thatcher regime cut off funding for radical local authorities such as the Greater London Council during the 1980s. Parallel with the dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state, the outsourcing of industrial production to offshore factories helped create a new international division of labor. These novel, intertwined strategies of capital accumulation and social regulation effectively obliterated the revolutionary energies and alignments hailed by Carmichael. Rather than occupying an empowering location in ghettos as he and others imagined they would, blacks in the United States and Britain were subjected over the following decades to further rounds of spatial apartheid whose most brutal realization is in America's prison-industrial complex.⁵¹ The denizens of U.S. ghettos were rendered a form of surplus humanity, whose primary social utility lies in legitimating ever-intensifying levels of racially coded backlash. These tremendous setbacks have, however, further underlined the urgency of internationalist approaches to black liberation.

REPRESENTING THE CREOLE CONTINUUM

During the Black Power era, perhaps the crucial question for cultural activists of West Indian background in Britain was the issue of what Orlando Patterson called "an absence of ruins": the apparent lack of precolonial traditions that might legitimate viable independent political and cultural movements in the Caribbean.⁵² Like Carmichael, in other words, cultural activists of the day were intent on elaborating international linkages that would help leverage otherwise isolated liberation movements. Patterson's perspective catalyzed heated debate among the members of the British-based Caribbean Artists Movement, many of whom saw his arguments as disempowering.⁵³ For a writer such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Patterson and previous writers such as

George Lamming and V. S. Naipaul had anatomized the fragmented, alienated condition of Caribbean modernity.⁵⁴ The task was to find ways to transcend and heal this condition.⁵⁵ This ambitious work of healing would, however, require a detailed investigation of the Creole societies of the Caribbean. In working out his theories of interculturalization, Brathwaite was also developing important models of collective identity and agency for contemporary black Britons.

If the project of Caribbean modernist writers was to make what Simon Gikandi terms a “forced entry” into history, Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s work has been particularly informed by historical and ethnographic counterdiscourse.⁵⁶ Brathwaite’s work demonstrates that historiography and anthropology could be appropriated and used against the very colonial discourses that they had traditionally helped legitimate. More specifically, anthropological discourse furnished a means to challenge the linear, progressive European account of Caribbean history by focusing on the disjunctive and multiple temporal frames that characterize postcolonial Caribbean culture. In other words, while anthropological discourse denied coevalness to the colonized Other, this very temporal alterity allowed writers such as Brathwaite to introduce dissident cultural voices that exploded the putatively unified time-space continuum of the nation.⁵⁷ Like Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier, José María Arguedas, and Miguel Angel Asturias, Brathwaite drew on ethnographic research to engage with and reanimate the indigenous and non-Western cultural practices suppressed in the course of colonial conquest and domination. In the case of traditions such as negritude, celebration of the indigenous Other’s resilient traditions as an alternative to the corrupt and empty culture of Western modernity tended to perpetuate binary oppositions between the European Self and indigenous Other.⁵⁸ For a writer such as Brathwaite, however, this sort of primitivist embrace of alterity was impossible. In his historiographic work, Brathwaite was forced to confront head-on the “absence of ruins” postulated by Orlando Patterson and other Caribbean writers such as V. S. Naipaul.

Brathwaite approached this problem of Caribbean modernity using a vocabulary drawn from the pioneering ethnographic research of scholars like Melville Herskovitz and Jean Price-Mars, who, Brathwaite argued, had exploded the “myth of the Negro (non) past.”⁵⁹ For Brathwaite, the notion of the Middle Passage as a traumatic, total break was the product of a typically Eurocentric cultural perspective. Writing of

the folk culture of Jamaican slaves, Brathwaite sought to explain the apparent lack of cultural tradition in the Caribbean through a discussion of the unique signifying practices of African religious culture:

The significant feature of African religious culture was that it was (is) *immanent*: carried within the individual/community, not (as in Europe) existentially externalized in buildings, monuments, books. So that in a sense, African societies *did* appear to European observers to have “no culture,” because there were no externally visible signs of a “civilization.” That dance was African architecture, that history was not printed but recited, the contemporary Prospero could not understand. And yet it was the immanent nature of this culture that made its amazing and successful transfer from Africa to the New World/Caribbean, even under the extraordinary conditions of slavery[,] possible. The slave ship became a kind of psycho-physical space capsule, carrying intact the carriers of a kind of invisible/atomic culture.⁶⁰

Brathwaite ingeniously suggests that it is the limited epistemological orientation of Eurocentric observers that explains theories of social death and mimicry such as those of Patterson and Naipaul.⁶¹ Combined with the highly developed codes of cultural racism, this orientation killed off awareness of the living tradition of immanent culture that survived among the black masses in the Caribbean.⁶² Like both James and Carmichael, in other words, Brathwaite is intent on attacking the cultural assimilation of colonial and postcolonial elites to Eurocentric values, suggesting that this internalization is an obstacle to the development of truly autochthonous cultural/political traditions. Yet while Brathwaite’s analysis of what he dubs an African-derived “great tradition” is grounded in a model of colonially inflected class conflict within the Caribbean, he also acknowledges that European hegemony has forced this tradition underground for much of the region’s history.⁶³ Submerged in order to survive, the immanent tradition has, according to Brathwaite, “suffered a slow but steady process of fragmentation and deformation.”⁶⁴ Despite this fragmentation, this immanent tradition never completely disappears but rather wells up, Brathwaite suggests, like a subterranean spring during moments of particularly intense social conflict.

How can this “great tradition” survive the dominance of what

Brathwaite elsewhere calls “bastard metropolitanism” in the Caribbean? The answer lies in the fact that these two traditions cannot be seen as homogenous, monolithic opposites. In order to challenge ideas of the derivative character of Caribbean culture, Brathwaite developed a nuanced theory of creolization that undermines such Manichaean models of cultural difference. Central to Brathwaite’s work is the repudiation of a totalizing synthesis of the composite traditions of the region.⁶⁵ For Brathwaite, creolization is characterized by two, intertwined processes: *ac/culturation*, or “the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another,” and *inter/culturation*, or the “unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relation proceeding from this yoke.”⁶⁶ Brathwaite’s model of creolization attempts to account for the hegemony of European cultural norms while also invoking the forms of reciprocal exchange between different ethnic groups that took place in the long history of modernity in the Caribbean. The result is not so much a model of cultural schizophrenia in which aesthetic and political movements oscillate between European and African traditions, as an “osmotic” process of cultural interpenetration in which each of these poles is itself transformed.⁶⁷ Emerging from his detailed analysis of Caribbean history, Brathwaite’s model of creolization offered a pointed riposte to the nihilistic theories of Naipaul and Patterson. Thus, for Brathwaite, rather than simple mimicry, “Our real/apparent imitation involves at the same time a significant element of creativity, while our creativity involves a significant element of imitation.”⁶⁸

In addition to challenging notions of cultural mimicry, Brathwaite’s osmotic model of creolization also had strong political implications. Although, as Frantz Fanon noted, binary forms of thought could be a galvanizing force for anticolonial nationalism, they were predicated on simplistic models of popular culture that offered little cognitive purchase on the heterogeneous composition of Caribbean cultures such as those of Jamaica and Trinidad.⁶⁹ For Brathwaite, *lateral creolization* between subaltern groups such as people of African and Asian ancestry was an important factor on such islands, one that became particularly prominent following decolonization.⁷⁰ While Brathwaite discusses traditions of creolization between ethnic groups such as the incorporation of people of African descent into the Asian Hosenin festivities, he also points with great foresight to the intensification of ethnic conflict between such groups that characterizes the postcolonial scene in

nations such as Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. Brathwaite's analysis of creolization works against such exclusionary forms of ethnic identity by focusing on the osmotic character of cultural identities and on patterns of lateral as well as horizontal exchange.

Yet if the model of the creole continuum stresses mutability and fragility, Brathwaite seeks throughout his historical and poetic work to articulate the enduring character of the popular culture of the black diaspora. He therefore closes *Contradictory Omens* by arguing that the true cultural matrix of the Caribbean may be found not in the "bastard metropolitanism" of the elite but in the cultural traditions of the poor. Unlike many theorists of Black Power, however, Brathwaite's depiction of black popular culture is grounded in an understanding of the fluidity and dynamism of such cultural forms: "For the Caribbean, the basis of culture lies in the folk, by which we mean not in-culturated, static groups, giving little; but a people who, from the center of an oppressive system, have been able to survive, adapt, recreate. The unity is submarine."⁷¹ Brathwaite's oceanic metaphor for black culture references the terrible suffering and loss of the Middle Passage. Yet if the Atlantic is literally the watery grave of myriad black lives, the ocean also offers a painful but potent reminder of the wonderfully mobile, adaptable character of black culture. Brathwaite returns frequently to this metaphor in his poetic corpus to render the dynamic connections that link the cultures of the black Atlantic.⁷²

The Arrivants, the Caribbean's first epic poetic cycle, is a virtuoso evocation of the ties that bind the black diaspora across time and space.⁷³ Initially recited publicly in London on 3 March 1967 at the first of CAM's public readings, the opening section of the trilogy, *Rights of Passage*, traces an arc from loss and alienation to a revivifying reconnection to tradition and identity. The poem is divided into four sections, each of which is further subdivided into a number of long poems that together draw on a stunning variety of vernacular black cultural traditions and historical references. Beginning with a narrative re-creation of the westward migration of African peoples across the continent, *Rights of Passage* quickly picks up the theme of exile and the traumatic Middle Passage.⁷⁴ Written predominantly in Jamaica during the early to mid-1960s, the middle sections of Brathwaite's poem betray the impact of the generation of Caribbean writers who stressed black existential alienation. Yet while acknowledging and depicting these forms of cultural loss and crisis, Brathwaite offers a powerful riposte: the poem is itself a

performative embodiment of precisely the historical and geographical webs of contact that the alienation thesis tended to negate.⁷⁵ Most significantly, *Rights of Passage*, as its title suggests, focuses on the tradition of migration that links diasporic communities in the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain. Through its verbal evocation of the historical and cultural convergences that weave together communities in urban nodes like Chicago, London, and Kingston, Brathwaite's epic conjures a black Atlantic imaginary into being in the teeth of historical suffering and loss.

The opening section of *Rights of Passage* focuses on the figure of Tom, an obvious reference to the integrationist Uncle Tom figures who were so reviled during the heyday of Black Power.⁷⁶ Yet Brathwaite's Tom is a complex character, one who embodies memories of African glory as well as the devastating loss and self-pity that followed the Middle Passage. Nonetheless, despite remembering the unification of the Ashanti peoples with pride, Tom is trapped in an empty present in which he has "created / nothing but these worthless / weeds" and who is only capable of uttering the paradigmatic words of utter servility: "Massa, yes / Boss, yes / Baas" (15). As well as offering an icon of subservience to white power that is represented as spanning centuries and continents, Tom also signifies the loss of intergenerational connection. "All God's Chillun" describes the mocking contempt with which Tom's children address him: crushed by poverty, his memories of Africa mean nothing to his sons. Educated in a white world and brimming with self-contempt, Tom's sons urge him to conform to racist stereotypes and play the "Black buttin' ram" of white racial fantasy that stretches from *Othello* to *Superfly* and beyond.⁷⁷ Tom's melancholy reaction to his sons' internalization of such caricatures emphasizes his feeling of utter powerlessness: "when release / from further journey? / Ease / up, Lord" (21).

Yet even in Tom's seeming admission of crushing defeat, Brathwaite embeds a form of affirmation. For central to the challenge sounded by *Rights of Passage* to the thesis of black "social death" is the poem's use of what Brathwaite termed *nation language*, the diverse forms of creolized English spoken throughout the black diaspora.⁷⁸ Brathwaite's epic poem was one of the first Caribbean works to break away from the use of Standard English and from the clockwork beat of iambic pentameter. In the place of these European forms, Brathwaite substitutes myriad diverse poetic forms, all of them interconnected, however, through their relation to black vernacular cultural forms.

While composing *Rights of Passage*, Brathwaite had been experimenting with poetic forms derived from the African American jazz tradition.⁷⁹ In his epic poem, Brathwaite expands his range of technical citation and adaptation, including, as previous references suggest, other African-American musical forms such as the blues and gospel. Thus, even while he invokes traditions of white appropriation of black culture in a poem such as “Folkways,” Brathwaite reawakens the immanent cultural traditions of black America through virtuously verbal performance: “I am a fuck- / in’ negro, / man, hole / in my head / brains in / my belly” (30). Moreover, in addition to expanding his generic reach, Brathwaite also juxtaposes these African-American vernacular speech forms with examples of Caribbean nation language. The poem “Wings of a Dove,” for instance, is written in a rhythm that mimics the heavy beats of reggae poetry and that adopts the Rastafarian lingo that radical Jamaican poets like Bongo Jerry and Linton Kwesi Johnson would use so effectively in the following decade. Grounded in Brathwaite’s pathbreaking recuperation of nation language, the forms of creative diasporic stylistic appropriation and contamination of Standard English provide a concrete instance of creolization and give voice to the circuits of popular cultural exchange that link diasporic groups across geographic space.⁸⁰

If these technical experiments instantiate the “subterranean unity” of the black diaspora, the theme of migration that permeates and structures *Rights of Passage* suggests further historical continuities. Black migration is, of course, a product of desperate attempts to escape the conditions of grinding poverty and exploitation meted out by structures of racial supremacy around the world. The resulting patterns of migration and urbanization link black populations in the Caribbean, the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. Brathwaite references these materials conditions as well as the significant social and artistic movements that emerged from black migrations around the world in poems such as “The Journeys” and “The Emigrants,” the central poem in his epic’s third section.⁸¹ This latter poem embodies the kind of “magnetization” and unificatory vision that Brathwaite described Stokely Carmichael’s speech effecting. The emigrants Brathwaite describes are driven by economic necessity into migrations that have little of the glamour associated with travel to exotic locations in a poem such as “The Journeys,” with its sly references to Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. In contrast to the jazzed-up vision of the New Negro offered by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Brathwaite depicts a drab popula-

tion with few aspirations and even fewer opportunities despite their ceaseless displacement. The poem's reference to these people as "Columbus coursing kaffirs" is laden with painful irony, since it implicitly suggests that diasporic migrants continue the colonial voyages of explorers such as Columbus while also referring to such migrants using the pejorative South African term for blacks. The implication is that dreams of wealth such as those Columbus harbored are illusions, particularly for a population whose movements continue to be controlled by structures of inequality equivalent to a form of global apartheid.

What would be the outcome of the aborted dreams of these migrants in search of their own Cathay? For Brathwaite, these restless journeys have created festering sores in the cities of the overdeveloped world. Brathwaite imagines urbanization creating a deprived mass poised to take radical action in the streets of cities around the world. Written in Rastafarian dialect, "Wings of the Dove" articulates the anger of the black masses against economic elites, no matter what their skin color, and looks forward to a fiery day of judgment in which the people will rise up and earthly injustice will be razed. Drawing on the dread rhythms of reggae, the voice of the Rastafarian prophet in this poem records the anger of the black masses living in ghettos such as Kingston's Trench Town. The warning Brathwaite issues is just as strong as that of activists such as Stokely Carmichael. Before the table of contents in *Black Power*, Carmichael and his cowriter, Charles Hamilton, offered a controversial prophecy that the conditions they were about to describe would lead to massive civil strife if the United States did not change course. In "Wings of the Dove," Brathwaite predicts a similar outcome, and thereby offers an indictment of the limited progress obtained during the era of civil rights and decolonization.

Yet to suggest that the fiery Rastafarian rhetoric of "Wings of the Dove" is Brathwaite's sole or even central response to the black condition would be to traduce the multivoiced quality of his epic. While he is anxious to record the righteous, revolutionary anger emerging from Rastafarianism and other militant Black Power groups, Brathwaite is equally intent on dramatizing the quotidian endurance that has helped members of the black diaspora survive four centuries of oppression. Thus, in "The Dust," Brathwaite captures the speech rhythms of poor women from the islands. The central narrative poem of *Rights of Passage's* final section, "The Dust" centers on the exchange that takes place between a group of friends as they gather in a rural shop to make their

purchases. Written in Caribbean nation language, the poem highlights the ancient herbal knowledge preserved by such women as well as the traditions of mutual aid through which the women keep their meager domestic economies afloat. Most importantly, however, "The Dust" highlights the women's attempts to survive in the face of often inexplicable and irresistible forces. The main speaker of the poem, Olive, attempts to explain a recent bout of illness on her island by recounting the tale of an eruption on a distant island of the archipelago that sends a cloud of volcanic ash into the atmosphere, blighting crops, swallowing up the sun's rays, and destroying the people's hope. Women such as Olive are the victims of what they see as the inscrutable gestures of a malevolent god. Although the other women remain skeptical about Olive's explanation for the "pestilence" that has afflicted them, Olive's narrative of woe demonstrates her ability to cope with everything, short, that is, of such apocalyptic natural events. Like the rest of this final section of the poem, "The Dust" offers a return to the Caribbean after the many journeys taken by the emigrants, signifying a reterritorialization for the exiled intellectual as well. Brathwaite grounds this return in popular cultural forms such as Olive and her friends' religious awareness. It is in such cultural resources that Brathwaite locates not only the inspiration for endurance in the face of adversity but also the creolized forms and practices that characterize Caribbean culture. In later books of *The Arrivants*, Brathwaite extends this analysis of black popular culture, turning to syncretic religious rituals of the Caribbean such as vodun, Santeria/lucumi/shango/kele/etu, koromanti play/winti/kumfa, nation dance, and kumina, as well as to the practices of more nominally Christian sects like Zion, Revival, Pukumina, Shouter, Shaker, and Spiritual Baptist. Within such quotidian sites, Brathwaite's epic cycle traces a genealogy of origins that leads from the Caribbean, across other nodes of the black diaspora in the United States and Britain, to Africa.⁸² It is in *Rights of Passage*, however, that Brathwaite most powerfully articulates the migrations that link the black Atlantic. Brathwaite thereby offers a powerful aesthetic corollary to Black Power's most crucial argument: the convergence of urban black consciousness across a transnational space. Despite the extraordinary suffering and loss narrated in *Rights of Passage*, Brathwaite's epic poem creates a veritable chorus of voices whose collective utterances constitute a revived black diasporic imaginary.⁸³

CONCLUSION

Despite many activists' feelings of being behind the curve, events in Britain during the 1960s foreshadowed the dystopian aspects of the civil rights movement. Unlike in the United States, where the civil rights movement seemed to be dismantling structures of juridical discrimination, in Britain both Tory and Labour governments repeatedly refused to pass antidiscrimination legislation in the 1960s. In addition, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 effectively stripped blacks of their citizenship, torpedoing liberal hopes for integration such as those kindled in the United States during the civil rights era. Writing of the act in 1964, the Trinidad-born activist Claudia Jones argued that the implicit racial discrimination in the act effectively rendered nonwhite Commonwealth immigrants to Britain second-class citizens.⁸⁴ Rather than tending toward at least the illusion of racial reform, as the United States seemed to be under pressure from the civil rights movement, Britain was sliding toward neofascist policies of ethnic cleansing in the form of calls for the repatriation of black Britons by the late 1960s.⁸⁵ Claudia Jones's analysis of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act suggested that, far from being halting, incorporated into the liberal-democratic nation-state, blacks were essentially turned into scapegoats whose fear-inducing presence legitimated the dismantling of social democracy.⁸⁶

Claudia Jones was well placed to assess this turn toward neofascism in Britain. A former head of the Young Communist League in New York and editor of the CPUSA's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, Jones had lived through the worst years of the anti-Communist backlash in the United States during the Cold War. Her writings for radical organs following World War II stressed the link between European fascism and manifestations of white supremacy within the United States, making the argument that the U.S. claims to hegemony as a leader of the "free world" would only resonate with movements for decolonization if America succeeded in eradicating manifestations of domestic "Hitlerism" such as lynching.⁸⁷ For her efforts to eradicate racial terror, Jones was arrested and charged with seeking the violent overthrow of the U.S. government following the passage of the McCarran Act in 1948. During her hearing, however, Claudia Jones placed the U.S. government itself on trial, arguing, in a letter sent to the recently created United Nations, for an international investigation into the way in which

immigrants were being treated under the McCarran security laws.⁸⁸ Her fate, Jones argued, was symptomatic of a broader struggle: "If we can be denied all rights and incarcerated in concentration camps, then trade unionists are next; then the Negro people, the Jewish people, all foreign-born, and all progressives who love peace and cherish freedom will face the bestiality and torment of fascism. Our fate is the fate of American democracy."⁸⁹ Jones's letter to the UN suggests that, while she might have invoked notions of U.S. global leadership predicated on the Truman Doctrine like other leaders of the period, she retained a strong sense of internationalism in the face of Cold War isolationist sentiments.⁹⁰ The chain of affiliations she establishes in her letter to the UN between antiracist activists and American democracy in general effectively highlights the danger represented by McCarthy-era purges, which she quite explicitly compares to Nazism.

Notwithstanding her powerful self-defense, Jones was imprisoned for several years and eventually deported to Britain in 1955. Once there, she quickly became involved in radical politics of a decidedly internationalist ilk. In an interview given shortly after her arrival in Britain, for example, she pointed out the domestic ramifications of U.S. militarism and imperialism by saying, "I was deported . . . because I fought for peace, against the huge arms budget which funds [*sic*] should be directed to improving the social needs of the people."⁹¹ She also campaigned against apartheid, going on a hunger strike outside the South African embassy in 1962 to protest the incarceration of Nelson Mandela. In addition, Jones quickly immersed herself in the cultural life of Britain's diasporic community. Following the Notting Hill riots of 1958, she organized the first Caribbean Carnival to help revive the black community's spirits. Perhaps most important, however, was her founding and editorship of the *West Indian Gazette*, the first truly community-based publishing effort of the post-1948 era and the primary political and cultural organ for black Britons from the late 1950s until Jones's death in 1964. Jones used the pages of the *West Indian Gazette* not only to keep the black community in Britain abreast of political developments in the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States, but also to challenge the turn of the British establishment toward increasingly explicit forms of racism.

In the pages of the *West Indian Gazette*, for instance, Jones repeated the warning given by Dr. Martin Luther King following his visit to Britain in 1965. Challenging the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, King

argued that “as far as housing is restricted and ghettos of a minority are allowed to develop, you are promoting a festering sore of bitterness and deprivation to pollute your national health.”⁹² Jones maintained in her article that the answer to the growth of ghettos in Britain was not, as many members of the political establishment held, the termination of immigration, but rather the banning of discrimination in housing and elsewhere. Despite such calls for institutional reform, Jones, unlike many of her compatriots, was not under any illusions about the beneficence of the British liberal tradition.⁹³ Instead, she argued that an elaborate ideological apparatus had been constructed to legitimate British imperialism, condemning the British working classes to an insular and racist outlook concerning their brothers and sisters in the colonies:

All the resources of official propaganda and education, the superstructure of British imperialism, were permeated with projecting the oppressed colonial peoples as “lesser breeds,” as “inferior coloured peoples,” “natives,” “savages,” and the like—in short, “the white man’s burden.” These rationalizations served to build a justification for wholesale exploitation, extermination, and looting of the islands by British imperialism. . . . These artificial divisions and antagonisms between British and colonial workers, already costly in toll of generations of colonial wars and ever-recurrent crises, have delayed fundamental social change in Britain, and form the very basis of colour prejudice.⁹⁴

Jones’s sensitivity to the links between culture and imperialism was evident not only in such explicitly political passages as this one, but also in her editorship of the *West Indian Gazette*, which she used as a vehicle for inspiring black pride and autonomy. Crucial to this sense of self-esteem, Jones observed, was pride in the growth of national liberation movements in the colonial territories that many black Britons had until recently called home.⁹⁵ Britain’s “Afro-Asian-Caribbean peoples,” whom Jones saw as increasingly united by their common experience in Britain, therefore promised to reintroduce a radical internationalist consciousness into the parochial world of British politics, challenging several centuries of racist imperial ideology.

The political experiences of the embryonic black British community during the 1960s hammered home the urgency of an international-

ist outlook. Pioneering organizations such as the Campaign Against Racism and Discrimination (CARD), established following Dr. King's visit by Jones and other progressives as a multiracial coalition, splintered when the group's black leaders offended white liberals by seeking to establish control of the organization.⁹⁶ As such multiracial coalitions foundered, younger leaders of the black community looked to the United States and anticolonial nationalist organizations in the colonies for inspiration. By the time of Stokely Carmichael's visit to Britain in 1967, groups dedicated to the autonomous organization of the black community such as the Michael X's Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS) had already been formed.⁹⁷ Heavily influenced by Black Power currents in the United States, RAAS and organizations such as Nigerian playwright and activist Obi Egbuna's United Coloured People's Association adopted militant postures of black autonomy, grassroots populism, and anti-imperialist, antiracist unity.⁹⁸ Carmichael's visit further underlined the vanguard character of developments in the black communities of America. Yet despite the apparently derivative character of many of these British political groupings, the Black Power imperative to decolonize the mind led to the evolution of genuinely novel cultural initiatives that flowed from the strong ties of Britain's black communities to their former homelands in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.