

Introduction

HISTORY MOVING FAST

History moves very fast these days and can quickly leave the dull behind.

C. L. R. JAMES

at London's West Indian Students' Centre, August 1967¹

We need bodies, and we need cats that think black.

DICK GREGORY

at London's West Indian Students' Centre, February 1968²

ON A CHILLY SATURDAY EVENING on February 3, 1968, the African American novelist James Baldwin addressed an audience at the West Indian Students' Centre in London's Earl's Court neighborhood. He spoke on the question of freedom, and the meaning of black experience in the pursuit of freedom. An acclaimed writer, a celebrity of the American civil rights movement, and a famously good speaker, Baldwin drew quite a crowd, and he was joined by the African American comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory, who had addressed a large crowd in the same room a few days previous.³ Their audience was mostly black but with a scattering of white faces; a mix of women and men, though men predominated. Everybody listened intently, and everybody smoked. Many, seduced by Baldwin's warm humor, laughed. But most were also angry. One man shouted a denunciation of Baldwin for his continued use of the term "negro," now "black" was the order of the day; another accused him of a "contemptuous" regard for Africa.

On everyone's mind was the rapidly changing pace of the politics of global black and anticolonial liberation. Baldwin was speaking just days after the

Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese People's Liberation Army had launched the Tet Offensive against U.S. and South Vietnamese armies, and after a year of tumultuous change in the American civil rights movement, as many African Americans began to reframe the question of racial justice now in the language of Black Power, and as successive American neighborhoods went up in flames. This was a situation that required some urgent decisions.

"How do you envisage the black man's fate, say within fifty years?" one woman asked him.

"Which is better, integration or Black Power?" asked another.

A middle-aged white man, pained by the denunciations of whiteness frequent that night, appealed to Baldwin: "Do you think that there is any place for the white liberal in the Black Power movement? [...] Because I've attended a lot of meetings on this subject of Black Power at which, in particular, English people feel very hurt because you get the line from the Black Power, 'we don't want you.'"

Both the speakers and audience at the West Indian Students' Centre that night were clear that they were discussing important questions. Though the address was by an African American, and to an audience mostly of West Indian migrants, they were clear also that the discussion did not refer only to America or the Caribbean. Responding to the self-confessed "white liberal" anxious about his own role in this new global moment, Baldwin reminded his audience of what was at stake in the freedom they were discussing that evening. "It is not a matter of my liberation," he insisted, "it is also a matter of yours." This was an argument that would be heard often. Dick Gregory, wading into the discussion, advised the man on how this liberation was to be achieved. "We need bodies," said Gregory, "and we need cats that think black."

THINKING BLACK

Dick Gregory's call was a common one in the two decades following the rise of Black Power as a transnational political formation in the mid-1960s. It was a call that was heard by many in Britain, the Caribbean, and the United States of America, and it mobilized an extraordinarily rich political culture. In Britain, a network of institutions and organizations, as well as a wide variety of new cultural practices, were held together by Gregory's two ambitions: to get bodies, and to get those bodies "thinking black." This book traces the formation of that political culture and the new purchase that ideas

and experiences of blackness had in Britain between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s. It follows the development of new cultural practices that came to be signified as black by an expansive network of activists and intellectuals who used them to shape a distinctly “black” politics, and “black” ways of thinking. These men and women—teachers, writers, publishers, booksellers, campaigners, picketers, marchers, and revolutionaries—were part of transnational anticolonial and civil rights networks. Many were socialists, some were feminists. Most regarded themselves as radicals. In Britain, they sought to identify, confront, and overturn the racism that they saw, not only structuring British society and politics from top to bottom, but upholding all manner of other inequalities. To transform, they insisted, British society needed to start “thinking black,” recognizing how histories of racialized oppression continued to structure social and political life. Their primary focus was often on Britons of African, Caribbean, and South Asian descent, who, they felt, could better fight the oppressions they faced by thinking of and recognizing themselves as “black” people. But they rarely assumed that thinking in this way was of benefit only to those who understood themselves as “black.” “Thinking black,” indeed, was seen to be the necessary preoccupation of all who sought to build a fairer, more equal and democratic society out of Britain’s imperial past.

The legacy of this way of thinking about social and political life in Britain can be seen today perhaps most forcefully in the work of critics like Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. They have insisted on the centrality of race in the making of modern Britain, and on the insights offered for understanding this dynamic of British modernity by adopting the vantage point of those whom Satnam Virdee has termed Britain’s “racialized outsiders.”⁴ This book situates such arguments within their wider contexts, locating them as part of a diverse formation of blackness in Britain between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, which drew on, dialogued with, and brought to Britain a global black liberation politics forged in the fight for a decolonized world. This was Britain’s moment of “thinking black.” Hall and Gilroy’s work has been remarkably productive in remaking how politics in Britain has been thought about—problematizing the categories by which we explain social life, the divisions that sustain discussions of the political and the cultural, the intellectual and the popular, the epistemological and the ontological. My purpose is to show how the force of this revolution in thought came from the energies of the wider formation of which Hall and Gilroy were a part, and how it animated a political culture.

Today, the word “black,” when applied to particular social phenomena—“black politics,” “black culture”—appears to hold a self-evident meaning. It refers, or so it seems, to the political or cultural activities or traditions of a particular group of people (“black people”), usually, though not always, people of African descent. But this apparently settled and self-evident meaning of blackness is a relatively new historical development. The ascendancy of “black” as the description of an ethnic or racial category, to replace older descriptors such as “negro” and “colored,” is in one sense simply a story of changing vocabulary. But it is also a political story. The purchase of “black” as a category of ethnic or racial identity from the mid-1960s on was knitted together with its purchase as a political category, marking an embrace of bodies and cultural practices understood as “black,” and a commitment to political changes—usually radical in their ambitions—understood as the consequence of a “black” historical experience.

There are two points here. First, in attempting to define what characterized blackness, activists and intellectuals set out how it referred to a particular kind of critical perspective informed by the experience of racialization, and the politics that this entailed. Second, and related to this, blackness did not coincide neatly with any biological fact or supposed ethnic group. It involved a positioning in relation to the forces that attributed weight to these very categories, and therefore signaled a critical relation more than an already-existing fact. In this, many could come to inhabit or think with blackness. “Black” in these years could refer to African heritage, and many Britons of African descent chose to describe themselves as black in this way, particularly with the rise of the “black is beautiful” movement and the new, transnational music cultures of soul and reggae. But many who were not of African descent also came to think with blackness, or identify as black. Blackness, as Dick Hebdige noted in the mid-1970s, held a powerful cultural capital and promise, particularly for disaffected white youth turning “from a whiteness which wasn’t worth much anyway, to a blackness which just might mean something more.”⁵ In greater numbers, many British Asians also came to articulate their politics through blackness, and to locate themselves within a broad conception of black culture that borrowed often from African American, Caribbean, and Afro-British forms, but deployed these alongside South Asian cultural practices with little sense of contradiction. Blackness, in other words, was unstable, multiple, and multidirectional, which proved to be both its strength and its fragility.⁶

The politics of blackness uniquely promised to address a particular experience of racialized oppression at a time when British social and political life

appeared to be consolidating around a revived politics of whiteness. In the two decades between 1962 and 1981, successive British governments passed legislation that effectively attempted to define the rights of British citizenship in racial terms. They did so first through a series of immigration acts restricting the rights of nonwhite Commonwealth citizens to enter Britain freely, and later, with the 1981 Nationality Act, in a redefinition of British citizenship itself.⁷ This top-down race politics was joined by a racism from below, soon to be coordinated by the Conservative (and later Ulster Unionist) MP Enoch Powell. Although it had racialized citizenship, the Labour government's simultaneous pursuit of a "race relations" agenda outlawing (some) forms of racial discrimination left it open to a white populist charge that it had abandoned the people and failed to uphold racial order.⁸ Powell seized this charge to dramatic effect on April 20, 1968, when he delivered his infamous "rivers of blood" address in Birmingham, denouncing race relations legislation and laying the groundwork for his later calls for "repatriation" of nonwhite Britons. Triggering a groundswell of public support, Powell definitively shifted the terrain of British politics.⁹ After his intervention, as Stuart Hall noted at the time, race became "the prism through which the British people [were] called upon to live through, then to understand, and then to deal with the growing crisis."¹⁰

As the politics of race in Britain tightened, the global politics of Black Power and decolonization came closer to home. The rise of a radical politics of blackness as the defining feature of many anti-racist, anticolonial, and black liberation projects from the second half of the 1960s to the early 1980s marked a new turn in the history of decolonization and black liberation. Certainly, there were continuities with older political projects, and certainly black nationalism had long featured in the political movements of the black Atlantic, from Martin Delany to Marcus Garvey.¹¹ But the language of blackness assumed a distinctly new weight in the mid-1960s. This was, as William Van Deburg has proposed of the U.S. context, a moment in which black culture became "a tool of liberation," and it is for this reason that Eddie S. Glaude has proposed we read Black Power as a "politics of transvaluation [...] best understood as a reassessment of 'blackness' in terms of its value for black lives and struggle."¹² From the mid-1960s on, new political projects couched in a revived language of blackness took root on a global scale. Black Power, black arts, black consciousness, and Rastafarian movements sprang up across the black Atlantic, from the United States and Canada to Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, as well as in Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and

India.¹³ The world appeared to be on the brink of transformation, and many locating themselves through cultures and politics of blackness in Britain were ready to be a part of its transformation. The sense of impending change was palpable. “It soon come,” as Linton Kwesi Johnson wrote in a poem of 1975. “It soon come / look out! look out! look out!”¹⁴

The expansion of “black” feeling, cultures of blackness, and “black” activism marks this era as a key conjuncture in modern British history. To understand how this conjunctural shift moved, this book examines how “black” was made into a category of experience and politics at this time. For the English novelist Colin MacInnes, writing about the rise of blackness in Britain in the early 1970s, depths of feeling were waiting to be mobilized by black activists. “Black Power propaganda, in effect, consists far more in saying simply to fellow blacks, ‘Get up off your arse, man’ than of telling anyone anything that they didn’t already know either through personal experience, or else from a thousand hereditary tales,” MacInnes wrote. “Consequently, though Black Power militant groups in England may be few in number, I’d say there are equally few, among the 300,000 West Indians in our country, who disagree with the basic Black Power premises.”¹⁵ MacInnes was right to point to potentialities nascent among those of whom he spoke. For many of them, life in Britain had made the indignities of the colonial past come to seem peculiarly close—as one woman explained to the Indian journalist Dilip Hiro in 1969, it was in “coming to this country” that “you get to realise that we’re part of slavery.”¹⁶ But if MacInnes was correct to note the proximity of such feelings, it was a proximity made speakable through the new cultures of blackness. If “black” arose as a political language in this era, it was one rooted in a culture that generated an outpouring of new energies in music and literature, fashion and hairstyles, modes and mediums of communication. This was the era of soul and reggae, dance halls and deejays, Afros and badges, prison memoirs and *Roots*.¹⁷ These new transnational mediums for communicating blackness had substantial traction in Britain. A Bristol man explaining the causes of friction with his employer to the Jamaican sociologist Ken Pryce in the early 1970s, for example, suggested that it came “from reading too much history of slavery.”¹⁸ For a woman from London, following BBC broadcasts of the U.S. television series *Roots* “none of the black workers spoke to the white workers and if any white person had said anything that day there would have been riots.”¹⁹ For those activists and intellectuals whom I discuss in this book, “thinking black” was the challenge of coordinating these rapidly expanding cultures into a political formation.

Cultures of blackness provided expressive mediums by which past or new memories and experiences could be created, or find meaning. Black activists sought to build an affective economy of blackness on the back of these new cultural practices, working to bind a new political community together in the name of blackness.²⁰

The development of a politics of blackness involved the coordination of a dissimilar, fractious terrain. MacInnes was probably wrong that few would have disagreed with the premises of Black Power. Even given how famously flexible definitions of Black Power could be, there would be those that would reject it outright.²¹ When Stokely Carmichael visited London in 1967, for example, local West Indians called a mass meeting to publicly repudiate Black Power, and contacted the local press to express their displeasure that Black Power politics might take root in Britain.²² Those who did identify themselves through a politics of blackness might find themselves misrecognized by others because of their ethnicity or gender. It was not only among West Indians that memories of the atrocities of slavery in the Caribbean were resonating, for example, as BBC journalists discovered when they interviewed South Asian students about Black Power in 1968 and found such topics being readily recalled, alongside denunciations of British violence in colonial India.²³ But while many articulated their politics through Black Power, this articulation was easier for some than for others. Ansel Wong, a Trinidadian of African and Chinese descent who became a leading figure in the early black arts movement in Britain, lived with all kinds of “inner turmoils and tensions.” As he coordinated political, education, and arts programs across London, he was haunted by hints and references to his ethnicity that placed him outside the category of black, and he found himself having to “stick to the ideology and the dogma, as opposed to people’s perceptions of identity and colour of skin.”²⁴

If many came to understand themselves as black, then, they did so by bending the category into many different meanings, making more claims upon it than it seemed it could possibly hold. These are what Brent Hayes Edwards has called the “necessary hauntings” of articulated formations, the points of “misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation.”²⁵ The political culture of blackness was held together by uneasy articulations, described by Edwards as processes of “linking or connecting across gaps.”²⁶ Black projects brought together many different people—women and men, South Asian, Caribbean, African, black and white British. They also brought together many different practices—protests against police brutality, critiques of the authoritarian turn of the state, reformulations of education and modes of

self-expression, and critiques of the structure of capital and its social relations. Each of these articulations of blackness involved translations between dissimilar experiences, affects, structures, and histories. This made for an unstable, often contradictory, coalition. But there was nonetheless a certain unity to the political and cultural projects working through a language of blackness in this era, even while this unity did not mean a perfect symmetry of all parts. This was the work that “thinking black” did. Remarkably, blackness held together. Rallies happened. Schools were established and supported. Conferences were organized. Deeply significant cultural and intellectual work was done. The apparent ability of blackness to make sense of so many different phenomena, and to interpellate so many different subjects, makes it a formation worth examining. Despite the volatility and contradictions between its various articulations, the politics of blackness was coordinated to considerable political effect, to the extent that it became a primary means of decolonizing British society in the late twentieth century.

DECOLONIZING BRITAIN

In December 1982, the Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie published his “The New Empire within Britain” in *New Society*. This essay was a study in what Rushdie termed “a gulf in reality”: “White and black perceptions of everyday life have moved so far apart as to be incompatible.”²⁷ His own position in this antagonism was slippery. He spoke with authority on “black perceptions” and clearly identified himself with the “new empire within Britain.” But Rushdie defined this new empire variously as “black people” and “black and Asian,” while his pronouns occasionally raised him above either designation to talk in equally detached terms of the “them” of white Britain and the “them” of black. Such was the complexity of interpellation into blackness in this moment, and such slippages were common. Rushdie’s classic exploration of race and immigration in Britain in *The Satanic Verses* (1987) later made much comedy of the misrecognitions of blackness in its playful depiction of Black Power rallies.²⁸ His essay, though, focused on a key claim made across the many articulations of blackness common in these years: that to understand contemporary British politics, one had to return to the era of empire, and to move forward, one had to decolonize Britain.

Decolonization was the promise of the politics of blackness. As one West Indian interviewed about involvement in black British politics by the

Trinidadian labor activist Trevor Carter in the mid-1980s explained, “the Black Power movement [. . .] struck a chord with us in the sixties in Britain.” It “created the political space for us to redefine our own blackness,” and it taught him and others that “we had to decolonise ourselves.”²⁹ Photocopying Rushdie’s essay for her personal files, Stella Dadzie, an anticolonial activist of Ghanaian and English heritage, founding member of the Brixton Black Women’s Group and the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent, underlined the key phrases:

Racism is not a side-issue in contemporary Britain; it is not a peripheral minority affair. Britain is undergoing the critical phase of its post-colonial period. This crisis is not simply economic or political. It is a crisis of the whole culture. [. . .]

British thought and British society have never been cleansed of the Augean filth of imperialism. It is still there, breeding lice and vermin, waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends. The British may be the only people on earth who feel nostalgia for pillage and conquest and war.³⁰

In such thinking, the empire may have largely come to an end, but in Britain its afterlives continued.

The argument that the empire had a significant impact on metropolitan Britain, and that after empire this impact still reverberated, has only gained consensus among British historians relatively recently, and is not without detractors. For those historical actors who form the subjects of this book, however—those whose politics were premised on “thinking black”—these assumptions underpinned much of their thought and actions. Decolonization, in this mode, meant primarily breaking the hold of a racialized order seen still to structure British society at the end of empire, and seen to be the legacy of empire. In 1987, Paul Gilroy published his famous critique of the racialization of national identity in Britain between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, in which he identified the manner in which nonwhite Britons were excluded from imagined communities of Britishness, and demonstrated how such exclusion structured their relationship to the state, and how the politics of race structured the various social, cultural, and political crises of the period.³¹ Both Gilroy’s critique of the politics of race in Britain and the solutions he tentatively posed to these owed their origins in large part to the wider political projects of “thinking black” developed since the 1960s, and, as I argue in chapter 5, it is within such projects that we can locate his work. But while these projects were subterranean and marginalized for much of this period,

following Gilroy's work the positions adopted in such projects have gained greater ascendancy, decisive in shifting historiographical debate on Britain's transition to a post-imperial power, as historians have attended to the ways in which racial imaginaries of the colonial peripheries moved now to the former metropolitan center, and to center of national life.

As questions of race, immigration and decolonization have increasingly come to the forefront in studies of modern British history, this has necessarily led to the need to rethink the process of decolonization. The effects of colonialism lasted beyond the formal acquisition of constitutional sovereignty in the former colonies, and reverberated deep in the culture and politics of the metropole.³² In the task of understanding both how and when British culture and politics might be described as "decolonized," the role of Britain's postcolonial migrants holds an important place.³³ Decoding British culture, Bill Schwarz has proposed, "came to be the necessary pastime of all who journeyed across the seas" from the colonies and former colonies.³⁴ These migrants—particularly, Schwarz argues, West Indians—found themselves "having to interrogate the lived culture of the colonizers, in order to comprehend their own discrepant experiences," and in the process offered the potential to dismantle some of the practices and assumptions by which imperial hierarchies were maintained within Britain.³⁵ While migrants and migration have held a privileged position in this recent turn in the historiography, however, in this book, focusing on a later period than that which has usually preoccupied historians of decolonizing Britain, I look as much to the children of those migrants, to long-settled black and Asian communities in Britain, and to white Britons who took up the task of "thinking black" in an effort to confront the vestiges of empire as it organized late-twentieth-century British culture and politics. Uniting them was less their status as migrant, settler, or native Britons than their shared dedication to and production of a transnational practice of "thinking black" ascendant in this period and reorganizing the meanings of and means for decolonization.

Claims for the wider possibilities of decolonization realized through blackness were common. "We blacks in Britain have been the leavening for a new perspective in Britain," the Trinidadian poet and publisher John La Rose insisted in 1976, writing for the black political magazine *Race Today*. "And it is what Aimé Césaire, the poet, calls our total vision from below that has enabled us to behave here in Britain, in the US, Canada and Africa like we have so far."³⁶ Bringing their experiences of racialized subordination in the colonies to the former center of imperial power, La Rose and his

contemporaries would claim, those able to look upon it with better-trained eyes might better understand, and better contest, the hold of social inequality in Britain. Reading Britain's social order as a colonial order might, finally, allow Britain to be decolonized, too. "We bring to contemporary political life in Britain the unresolved tensions of five hundred years," one contributor to the West Indian Students' Centre's magazine wrote in 1970.

Surely we must share with the British people the prospect of creating a humane society for all. [...] the popular basic [black] identity has survived oppression, has evolved impulses and insights of resistance, has no muddled ideas of where we're at, and contains the content of the revolutionary impact that a regenerated and whole black community can have in Britain and the world.³⁷

In such pronouncements, we can see the promise that advocates of thinking black saw it to hold. The experience of five hundred years of oppression, as this writer put it, constituted a unique basis for a more universal contribution. Impulses and insights evolved in the tensions of colonialism, he proposed, could be shared to the benefit of all seeking to build a humane society out of the ruins of empire.

The politics of thinking black did not reject Britain and Britishness. Rather, it sought to reframe it, challenge it, and make it anew: "It is not a matter of my liberation, it is also a matter of yours." Historians increasingly recognize the extent to which the anticolonial nationalisms of the first half of the twentieth century were not framed in simple opposition to empire. Until the 1950s, as Marc Matera has demonstrated, black intellectuals and activists in Britain sought less a new world of independent, postcolonial nation-states than a reordering of sovereignty within the transnational political formations produced by imperialism.³⁸ Similarly, Kennetta Hammond Perry's study of postwar black British politics shows that in the era of decolonization, making claims on the political structures of imperial Britain defined anti-racism.³⁹ Despite this growing recognition of the intertwined nature of imperialism and anticolonialism, however, it remains the case that the story of the development of multiculturalism in Britain is told most frequently as a transition from blackness to black Britishness, as if the two formations only came into contact in the final decades of the twentieth century. Certainly, the difficulties of naming Britishness or Englishness as black identities were many. As Keith Piper remembers of his adolescence in 1970s Birmingham, though he and his friends had never even been to the West

Indies, from where their parents came, “race [...] existed as an indisputable and absolute fact in our lives. Our parents were West Indian, and so we would always be West Indian. [...] Englishness was never even considered as an option.”⁴⁰ The negotiation of Britishness by black Britons was fraught, particularly at a moment that Britishness was increasingly defined, culturally, politically, and in the legal structures of the state as a white identity, hooked around a provincial white Englishness. “When Enoch Powell spoke for England,” as Hanif Kureishi wrote of his time growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, “I turned away in final disgust.”⁴¹ Many looked beyond Britain’s shores to understand themselves culturally, and for models of the new political futures they aspired to. Kureishi, for example, turned to the Black Panthers, Jimi Hendrix, James Baldwin, and Muhammed Ali. Others would look to Angela Davis or Bob Marley. But it was precisely by drawing attention to the shared histories of Britain and the colonies that many black activists and intellectuals made their most successful critiques of the British state and insisted that blacks and whites were both victims of an imperial formation still intact after the fall of the colonial empire. As a character in Horace Ové’s 1975 film *Pressure* claims, realizing the insights of blackness while in conversation with his political allies, “white people in this country has been colonized and enslaved in this country—just like we. The only difference between them and us is that we can see the bars and the chains, but they can’t.”⁴² The era of blackness that this book explores is a history of Britain and Britishness; it is a history of projects for Britain’s decolonization.

Blackness held this promise for many Britons in the two decades between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s that this book explores. When James Baldwin and Dick Gregory visited the West Indian Students’ Centre in 1968, they were but two of a raft of African American intellectuals, civil rights activists, and entertainers visiting Britain in these years. Since the visits of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X in 1964, black Atlantic exchange was central to reorienting the politics of race in Britain. These men and women intervened forcefully in British politics at a moment when Britain’s fragile and short-lived race relations settlement was first being established, and as it faltered and fell, Black Power and decolonization politics from across the black Atlantic world offered new conceptions of what liberation might mean for the many facing growing institutional and interpersonal racism in Britain. It was the apparent pace of change inaugurated by this new political movement—*history moving fast*, as C. L. R. James would describe it to another audience at the West Indian Students’ Centre in 1967—that brought many into its fold in these years,

despite the difficulties that negotiating blackness sometimes involved. But this was not only for nonwhite Britons. A broad radical politics within Britain was reinvigorated through its encounter with the politics of thinking black, and in that loose formation we call the New Left, blackness often played a pivotal role in how the political crises of the current moment were conceptualised, and solutions to them proposed. These engagements were hooked around the liberation promise of blackness that Black Power and decolonization offered in this era, a promise sustained throughout the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. They declined only by the mid-1980s, with the failure of black liberation movements in the Caribbean, the shifting politics of radical anticolonialism brought about by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the growing differential incorporation of Britain's ethnic minorities into the structures of the state. The politics of race and decolonization shifted once again, and the era of radical blackness that this book traces closed.