

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

The Lost Pillar of British Political Culture: Black Constructions of British Fascism, 1930s–1970s

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Abstract

This article explores the history and development of British manifestations of a Black diasporic anti-colonial anti-fascist political tradition that stretches across the twentieth century. It centers the experiences and reflections of Black activists and intellectuals in Britain, exploring their efforts to theorize about fascism as a manifestation of white supremacy. The article explores what we can learn about British society and political culture by returning to the overlooked and excluded experiences of Black British activists and intellectuals—in particular, their theoretical and physical encounters with what they called British “fascism” from the 1930s to the 1970s. Journeying from interwar anti-colonial Marxist political writing, Black periodicals in the 1950s and 1960s, to the publications of the British Black Power movement, the article ultimately argues that these encounters confront historians of modern Britain with a different and generative way of thinking about British racism and British fascism in relational terms.

Introduction

On 7 June 1934, Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF) held a political rally at the Olympia exhibition center in west London. This was during the honeymoon period of Mosley’s fascist career. At this time, the BUF’s membership had reached its highest point of between 40,000 to 50,000 members, and the organization also enjoyed the sponsorship of the press baron Lord Rothermere, owner of the *Daily Mail*.¹ The rally in question attracted an estimated audience of between 10,000 and 15,000 people, including—as one account had it—150 sitting members of Parliament, many of them Conservatives.² The meeting featured a blend of fascist political theater and fascist political violence. Mosley’s two-hour speech was punctuated by interruptions from anti-fascist hecklers who clashed with heavy-handed Blackshirt stewards. With mounting interruptions and increasingly violent stewarding tactics, the meeting ended in what the *Manchester Guardian* called “mild chaos.” Fascist violence

¹ G. C. Webber, “Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 4 (1984): 575–606, at 595; Martin Pugh, ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts!': *Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (Jonathan Cape, 2005), 149–51.

² “Mosley Meeting Incident,” *Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1934, 6; Martin Pugh, “The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate,” *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 2 (1998): 529–42, at 530.

attracted widespread condemnation in the press and in parliament as both brutal and “un-British.”³

On the following day, a BBC radio news broadcast reported on the Olympia rally. The broadcast featured the testimony of the journalist Gerald Barry. Barry had been present in the audience and recounted some of what he had witnessed. He remembered:

I ... mingled with a number of the rank and file of the Blackshirts standing about in the building outside the auditorium, and I listened to their talk. I heard one of them bemoaning the fact that there were so many women present: it made their job so much more difficult. One said, “I don’t believe in all this grandmotherly stuff—I believe in treating a man so that he remembers it. We didn’t treat them soft out East, did we?” he added, turning to his companion.⁴

Barry’s remarks were overheard by the Trinidadian Pan-Africanist and communist, George Padmore. At that time, Padmore was living between London and Paris while writing a study of British imperialism in Africa—later published in 1936 under the title *How Britain Rules Africa*.⁵ Barry’s words made such a deep impression on Padmore that he included them, in a slightly truncated form, in the preface of his new book. Reflecting on the comments, Padmore wrote:

This remark about “out East” hardly needs any comment. It clearly shows that Englishmen who are accustomed to ill-treating Hindu women “out East,” and for that matter, Black women in Africa, cannot be expected to indulge in this “grandmotherly business” when the occasion arises for them to deal with women of their own race. Habits once formed are difficult to get rid of. That is why we maintain that the Colonies are the breeding-ground for the type of fascist mentality which is being let loose in Europe to-day.⁶

In highlighting the affinities between British imperialism and British fascism, Padmore was doing more than crudely attempting to damn the British Empire by associating it with the Third Reich. Padmore’s warnings about the relationship between fascism and imperialism in fact resemble what Cedric Robinson called a “black construction of fascism”—a way of conceptualizing, analyzing, and opposing fascism that refused to treat it as if it was “an historical aberration.”⁷ This was, wrote Robinson, a “theory of fascism” developed by “ordinary Blacks in the Diaspora and their leaders” and formulated on the basis of their “common discourse” and experiences. They conceptualized fascism primarily as a form of white supremacism, umbilically connected to other forms, systems, and ideologies of racist domination.

Where Robinson’s writings on this topic focused primarily on the African American mass movement that arose in response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in mid-1930s,⁸

³ Jon Lawrence, “Fascist Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Inter-War Britain: The Olympia Debate Revisited,” *Historical Research* 76, no. 192 (2003): 238–67; Martin Pugh, “The National Government, the British Union of Fascists and the Olympia debate,” *Historical Research* 78, no. 200 (2005): 253–62.

⁴ Vindicator, *Fascists At Olympia: A Record of Eye-Witnesses and Victims* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1934), 14.

⁵ Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa* (Manchester, 2009), 5.

⁶ George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (Wishart Books, 1936), 3–4.

⁷ Cedric J. Robinson, “Fascism and the Response of Black Radical Theorists,” in *Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. H.L.T. Quan (Pluto, 2018), 149–59, at 149.

⁸ It is worth noting that, in his paper, Robinson actually excludes Padmore from his list of theorists who shaped the “Black construction of fascism” on the grounds that he remained wedded to a narrowly conceived European Marxist interpretation of fascism as the crisis measures of the ailing capitalist system. See Robinson, “Fascism and

a focus on Britain reveals that Padmore was not alone in understanding fascism in what Bill Schwarz called “expansive” terms.⁹ Padmore’s writings stand as one of a series of manifestations in Britain of a Black diasporic anti-colonial anti-fascist political tradition that stretches across the twentieth-century Black world. Beyond Britain, its key contributors included W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Angela Davis, George Jackson, and countless others. Building on research on Black anti-fascism in other national and transnational contexts, this article centers the experiences and reflections of Black activists and intellectuals in Britain by exploring their efforts to theorize about fascism as a manifestation of white supremacy across an array of disparate primary sources.¹⁰ These include interwar anti-colonial Marxist political writing, the Black periodicals and community newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s, and the journals, newspapers, and manifestos of several British Black Power organizations in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Their invocations of fascism across this period were not identical and reflected the changing historical context. However, they invoked the term “fascism” in a way that expressed “a consistent, general sense of the term”—to borrow a turn of phrase from Christopher Vials’s work on Black anti-fascism in America.¹¹ For Black activists in Britain, “fascism” served as a conceptual tool for analyzing, interpreting, and articulating a lived experience of white supremacy. They invoked the term “fascism” to give ideological and structural shape to the politics of race—and within this, the operation of white supremacy—in Britain and its Empire. In the interwar period, anti-colonial invocations of fascism served to expose the kind of racist domination and economic exploitation upon which British colonialism relied, but that was obscured by liberal imperialist rhetoric about welfare and development. Later, after the Second World War, such invocations worked to reveal the dynamics of racism in Britain, which were often masked or presented as a marginal or exceptional intrusion into otherwise non-racist British political norms—what Kennetta Hammond Perry referred to as “the mystique of British antiracism.”¹²

Black political theorizing about “fascism” in Britain across the twentieth century represents a kind of anti-fascist “reverse tutelage,” to borrow the words Priyamvada Gopal used to describe the broader process by which anti-colonial thought and struggles shaped British

the Response of Black Radical Theorists,” 155–56. For Robinson, Padmore did not come round to a more expansive understanding of fascism until his writings in the 1950s in which he reflected on the 1930s. However, this reading ignores the nuances of Padmore’s position as well as much of Padmore’s political writing during the 1930s, both during his involvement with the Comintern and afterwards. In particular, Robinson overlooked Padmore’s anti-colonial anti-fascist contributions to the African American popular press—in newspapers like the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Amsterdam News*—publications Robinson cites elsewhere in his paper.

⁹ Bill Schwarz, “George Padmore,” in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, ed. Bill Schwarz (Manchester, 2003), 132–52, at 141.

¹⁰ Robbie Shilliam, “Ah, We Have Not Forgotten Ethiopia: Anti-Colonial Sentiments for Spain in a Fascist Era,” in *European Cosmopolitanism: Colonial Histories and Postcolonial Societies*, ed. Gurinder K. Bhambra and John Narayan (Routledge, 2017), 31–46; Robbie Shilliam, “From Ethiopia to Bandung with Fanon,” *Bandung: Journal of the Global South* 6, no. 2 (2019): 163–89; David Featherstone, “Anti-Colonialism, Subaltern Anti-Fascism and the Contested Spaces of Maritime Organising,” in *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective: Transnational Networks, Exile Communities, and Radical Internationalism*, ed. Kasper Braskén, Nigel Copsey and David Featherstone (Routledge, 2021), 155–75; Giuliana Chamedes, “How to Do Things with Words: Antifascism as Differentially Mobilizing Ideology, from the Popular Front to the Black Power Movement,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 84, no. 1 (2023): 127–55; Anna F. Duesing, “‘A Heritage of Fascists without Labels’: Black Antifascism and the Productive Politics of Analogy,” in *Fascism in America*, ed. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward (Cambridge, 2023), 247–77; Kian Aspinall, “W. E. B. Du Bois and European fascism between the wars,” *Race & Class* (2025): 1–24.

¹¹ Christopher Vials, *Haunted by Hitler: Liberals, the Left, and the Fight against Fascism in the United States* (Massachusetts, 2014), 160.

¹² Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2015), 100–04.

politics in the metropole.¹³ To talk in terms of fascism was to demand that the Black experience of colonial and racist domination in Britain and its Empire be taken seriously. Black thinkers mobilized an expansive understanding of fascism in an attempt to contribute to broader debates about colonialism and war in the 1930s, about decolonization and the Cold War in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and about creeping authoritarianism in the 1970s. These debates were much bigger than the anti-colonial publications from which they were pitched, with their relatively small and likely mostly Black readership. Furthermore, their contributions often went unheeded or otherwise failed to transform things as profoundly as those making them had hoped. Nevertheless, they offer a very different and potentially transformative reading of the politics of race in modern British history.

Their invocations of fascism express a way of understanding both fascism in Britain and the relationship between the organized fascist movement and broader racism in Britain that differs markedly from the way these phenomena have been understood by historians and political scientists. In his recent exhaustive history of the British “extreme right” across the twentieth and early twenty-first century, leading historian of British fascism Graham Macklin offered a forensic prosopographical exploration of the subterranean world of the movement’s leaders and fractious “groupuscules.” Although Macklin notes the centrality of race and the significance of imperialism for British fascist ideologues, the bulk of the book situates the British “extreme right” in a parallel political universe. Only in the conclusion of the 500-plus-page volume does he pause to remark, almost as an aside, that:

... extreme right activism has also had a profound, though curiously unstudied impact upon the lives of immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, the LGBTQ community and political opponents of all stripes, ranging from inflammatory rhetoric and hate crimes to physical assaults and murders.¹⁴

This line, coming as late and as fleetingly as it does, in many ways illustrates the problems with the field of “fascism and far-right studies.”¹⁵ The mostly white, mostly male historians and other scholars working in this field—and especially those working on Britain—have been remarkably hesitant to properly place fascism within the same analytical frame as colonialism, race, and, especially, whiteness, or to engage with the experiences and perspectives of racialized minorities. In general, they remain captivated and confined by their preoccupation with establishing historical fascism’s distinctive novelty and neo-fascism’s marginality. In this rendering, interwar continental European fascism fundamentally broke with what came before, and subsequent generations of bizarre and backward-looking imitators in Britain and beyond have essentially sought to revive or otherwise reheat “classical” fascism’s project of national rebirth. Writing in 1990, Robinson identified the obsession with analyzing fascism in isolation and as extraordinary as a “conceit.”¹⁶ For Robinson, the preoccupation with precisely pinning down the definition of fascism in ways that established it as something new, distinct, extraordinary, and separate was ultimately about vindicating the liberal-democratic “West.” This was a quest to establish the fundamental difference between the latter and the barbarous fascist outsider that had temporarily menaced it between the world wars.

In contrast, this article is inspired by the work of historian Leslie James, a former biographer of Padmore, who urges historians to think about fascism and colonialism *relationally*.

¹³ Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (Verso, 2019), 7–8.

¹⁴ Graham Macklin, *Failed Fuhrers: A History of Britain’s Extreme Right* (Routledge, 2020), 547.

¹⁵ Aurelien Mondon, “‘Far Right Studies’ and the Unbearable Whiteness of Being,” in *The Ethics of Researching the Far Right: Critical Approaches and Reflections*, ed. Antonia Vaughan, Joan Braune, Meghan Tinsley and Aurelien Mondon (Manchester, 2024), 75–85.

¹⁶ Robinson, “Fascism and the Response of Black Radical Theorists,” 149.

James explores the ways in which those writing in anti-colonial publications in West Africa and the British Caribbean during the interwar period understood fascism. James identifies an “anti-colonial anti-fascism” among colonized workers and intellectuals.¹⁷ Additionally, although less prominently, some anti-colonialists inspired by Black nationalist Marcus Garvey demonstrated support for aspects of fascism.¹⁸ Theorizing from “colonial experience and anti-colonial struggle,” James’s anti-colonial anti-fascists understood fascism as a politics of “excess”; more specifically, as a political project bent on the intensification and institutionalization of the violently racist and authoritarian habits of thought and behavior that were a central customary part of colonial practice but never part of official British colonial policy.¹⁹ James’s work is a vital reminder that, as the historian of fascism, George Mosse, once put it: “basically fascism invented nothing new, but pushed already present hopes, fears and prejudices to their logical conclusions.”²⁰ It is also notable that, in departing from the fastidiousness of those working in the field of “fascism studies,” James returns to Robert Paxton’s call for historians to watch fascism not in isolation, but “in action,” in the real world as it existed and exists.²¹

More consistently than any other group of thinkers, Black anti-colonial and anti-racist activists understood fascism as a process, viewing it in movement, and as something that was emerging, or was in danger of emerging, out of the immediate political conditions. They understood fascism in broadly consistent but also contingent terms; as a particular political manifestation of white supremacy but, like whiteness itself, as something that changed over time, meaning slightly different things at different political moments. Where Padmore identified “colonial fascism” as an outgrowth of British and European colonialism during the 1930s, the British Black Power activists writing decades later located fascism primarily in the racist authoritarianism of the neo-colonial British state—in its dealings with militant Black activists, migrants, and other minoritized groups. These were not two entirely separate interpretations of British fascism, but different phases in a long tradition of theorizing about fascism in Britain and its entanglements with older, structural, and institutionally embedded racism.

The article also welcomes the call of Marc Matera et al. to “historians of twentieth century Britain to think with and through race and to examine how it functions historically.”²² But where these historians are keen to “move away from histories of race that focus on the discourses of anti-racist activists and white nationalists,” this article returns to the work of Black anti-fascists to examine what A. Sivanandan called “the organic connection” between racism and fascism.²³ Perhaps the most significant contribution that Black analyses of British fascism stand to make lies in the way in which they focus our attention on the role that Britain’s organized white supremacist movement played in the broader politics of whiteness during the twentieth century. Instead of flattening new political developments into the mold of “classical” fascism, they were sensitive to the ways in which, at certain moments, the ethos and actions of a supposedly liberal-democratic nation-state could overlap, align, and, at times, collaborate with that of a supposedly “extremist” movement whose adherents were unfashionably explicit in their commitment to white supremacy.

¹⁷ Leslie James, “Blood Brothers: Colonialism and Fascism as Relations in the Interwar Caribbean and West Africa,” *The American Historical Review* 127, no. 2 (2022): 634–63, at 642.

¹⁸ James, “Blood Brothers,” 655–58.

¹⁹ James, “Blood Brothers,” 636, 658, 661–62.

²⁰ George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (Howard Fertig, 1999), 43.

²¹ Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 21, cited in James, “Blood Brothers,” 640.

²² Marc Matera, Radhika Natarajan, Kennetta Hammond Perry, Camilla Schofield and Rob Waters, “Introduction: Marking Race in Twentieth Century British History,” *Twentieth Century British History* 34, no. 3 (2023): 407–14, at 411.

²³ Matera et al., “Marking Race,” 411; A. Sivanandan, “RAT and the Degradation of Black Struggle,” *Race & Class* 26, no. 4 (1985): 1–33, at 30.

British fascism and “colonial fascism”

I want to begin the journey through the history of “black construction[s] of fascism” by returning to Padmore, one of several Black radicals in the interwar period who, “positioning themselves as both colonial and British in their London base, developed important tenets of anticolonialism, which in turn shaped the approach of their metropolitan allies.”²⁴ As recent scholarship has demonstrated, Padmore was an influential Black activist, shaping both the transnational Pan-African anti-colonial movement and enlightening the wider British Left on the injustices of colonialism.²⁵ In turn, his views were shaped by the political networks of the Black diaspora and the broader socialist movement. During the 1920s, he moved from his native Trinidad to attend university in the United States before entering the ranks of Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA), which took him to Moscow and then, in 1931, to Hamburg.²⁶ There, he edited the journal *The Negro Worker*, produced by the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, a branch of the Communist International (Comintern). He later wound up in London after being deported from Germany by the new Nazi government in February 1933, only a few short weeks after Hitler came to power. In 1934, he was also expelled from the Comintern after falling foul of the shifting party line. Where the Soviets now distinguished between *democratic imperialists* (Britain, the United States, and France) as potential allies and *fascist imperialists* (Germany, Italy, and Japan) as the ultimate enemy, Padmore continued to prioritize the struggle against *all* imperialists.

By the mid-1930s, Padmore was active in the London anti-colonial scene, speaking on the platforms of the International African Friends of Ethiopia and later playing a key role in the left-wing Pan-Africanist International African Service Bureau.²⁷ This is to say that he both contributed to and represented a wider Black anti-colonial political culture. Although excommunicated from Comintern, he also remained a committed communist and became increasingly convinced that the struggles against capitalism in the metropole and against colonial rule were interdependent.²⁸ This prompted his extensive involvement with the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a renegade faction of the Labour Party, committed to a more consistently socialist position and receptive to radically anti-colonial ideas.²⁹ Padmore was ultimately far more influential in the world of transnational anti-colonial politics than in domestic British politics. The ILP remained a marginal force in electoral politics and, in spite of the significant influence that Padmore and other anti-colonial intellectuals (notably C. L. R. James) had on the party, such influence was never dominant.³⁰

While his activism and intellectual contributions to the overlapping worlds of international anti-colonialism and the British Left have been covered elsewhere, Padmore’s preoccupation with Britain’s fascist movement has mostly escaped attention.³¹ Where Padmore touched on fascism in his books and articles, he mostly concentrated on the “bigger fish” of European fascist regimes, like Germany and Italy, or otherwise on instances of “colonial fascism” in the British Caribbean and especially in the Union of South Africa.

²⁴ Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 322.

²⁵ Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton, 2009); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (North Carolina, 2011); Theo Williams, *Making the Revolution Global: Black Radicalism and the British Socialist Movement before Decolonisation* (Verso, 2022).

²⁶ Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 23–26.

²⁷ Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa*, 23.

²⁸ Williams, *Making the Revolution Global*, 18.

²⁹ Williams, *Making the Revolution Global*, 13.

³⁰ Williams, *Making the Revolution Global*, 111.

³¹ James, *George Padmore*, 43–46; Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, 343–46.

That colonialism played such a central role in Padmore's analysis of fascism reflected not only his experiences as a British colonial subject, but also the debt he owed to Lenin's analysis of imperialism.³² Padmore argued that fascism was developing out of a colonial context, and was used to subordinate and discipline the Black working class as a means of ensuring their continued exploitation amid a crisis of capitalism. Although he did not use the term, for Padmore, fascism represented the most desperate stage of "racial capitalism." Within his attempts to theorize about the relationship between fascism, imperialism, and capitalism, he paused to reflect on Britain's home-grown fascist movement.

Elsewhere in his 1936 book *How Britain Rules Africa*, he returned to the subject of the British Union of Fascists. In the section on the labor movement in East Africa, Padmore discussed the case of the Earl of Erroll and High Steward of Scotland, Josslyn Victor Hay. In 1934, the Earl of Erroll returned to Kenya "as the special representative of Oswald Mosley" tasked with "organizing a fascist party among the European settlers in East Africa."³³ For Padmore, the Earl of Erroll personified his ideas about "colonial fascism" and featured in his writing as an illustrative example of the fascist potential and essence of settler colonialism. During the early years of the Second World War, following Erroll's scandalous and never definitively solved murder in 1941, Padmore contributed an article on Erroll to the ILP's newspaper, *New Leader*.³⁴ Erroll had been a member of Kenya's "Happy Valley" set, a group of British aristocrats living in Kenya's White Highlands. These settlers spent their time quaffing gin cocktails, sleeping with each other's wives, and lording it over colonized Africans. In fact, it was Erroll's affair with Diana Broughton, the wife of Sir Jock Delves Broughton, that likely got Erroll killed. What had caught Padmore's eye in the news coverage of Erroll's murder were reports that the police had discovered "[l]arge quantities of fascist literature" and "a membership card" for the BUF among his possessions.³⁵ Padmore took these discoveries as evidence of Erroll's ongoing commitment to Mosleyite fascism. While the evidence does not bear this out—Erroll's biographers argue that he grew disillusioned with fascism in around 1935 or 1936—Padmore still offers a fascinating consideration of what attracted white settlers to fascism, and of the affinities between fascism and settler colonialism.³⁶

Erroll originally converted to the cause of British fascism in 1934. That year, he and his wife visited England, during which time they attended the rally at Olympia and became part of Mosley's entourage for the summer. As well as noting Erroll's eventual disenchantment with fascism, his biographers tend not to take his fascism seriously. They argue that he had a fairly shallow grasp of its ideological tenets, understanding it primarily in terms of "super loyalty to the Crown, no dictatorship, complete religious and social freedom, an 'insulated Empire'... [and] higher wages and lower costs of living."³⁷

Padmore offered a different interpretation of Erroll's politics and political activities. In contrast to the biographers who portrayed Erroll as a foppish fascist, Padmore focused on what his political journey illustrated about the relationship between fascism and settler colonialism. He suggested that, far from becoming disillusioned with fascism, on returning to Kenya, "the Earl discovered that the settlers did not require him to expound Fascism

³² James, *George Padmore*, 37–38.

³³ Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa*, 359–60. See also the announcement in one of the BUF's newspapers, "Earl of Erroll as Blackshirt Delegate to Kenya," *Blackshirt*, no. 62, 29 June 1934, 10.

³⁴ George Padmore, "The Truth About the Murdered Fascist Earl," *New Leader*, 14 June 1941, 3.

³⁵ Padmore, "The Truth About the Murdered Fascist Earl," 3. This was also reported elsewhere in the British press; see "Peer Shot as Fascist?," *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1941, 16; "Kenya Murder Trial—Evidence About Fascist Party," *Manchester Guardian*, 27 May 1941, 8.

³⁶ James Fox, *White Mischief* (Vintage, 1998), 46, 145; Erroll Trzebinski, *The Life and Death of Lord Erroll* (Fourth Estate, 2000), 129.

³⁷ Elspeth Huxley, *Nellie: Letters from Africa* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), 105, cited in Fox, *White Mischief*, 46.

to them. For the most part, they were already full-blooded Fascists.”³⁸ Erroll quickly realized, claimed Padmore, that a dedicated Kenyan branch of the BUF was “not ... necessary.” In other words, Erroll did not need Mosleyite fascism because he enjoyed the privileges of “colonial fascism.” As Padmore saw it, Erroll and other white settlers were already deeply invested in a project of “state-directed racial supremacy, in which a dominant ethnic group enslaved a subordinate ethnic group (by employing extra-economic means, including terror, to compel it to labour) on the sole basis of its putative racial identity.”³⁹ In other words, the existing political structures of white settlerdom were sufficient. To illustrate this, Padmore noted Erroll’s rapid rise through the ranks of the white settler political scene—he became president of the Convention of Associations and later served on Kenya Colony’s Legislative Council, and then on the Executive Council. After his dalliance with fascism and shortly before his murder, Erroll had even been involved in coordinating the Colony’s contribution to the British war effort.

In analyzing the relationship between imperialism and fascism, Padmore looked past externals, such as membership in organizations like the BUF or evidence of stated Nazi sympathies, and focused on essentials. In this sense, for Padmore, Erroll had not misunderstood fascism so much as he had recognized and been enticed by its all-too-familiar white supremacist essence. Throughout his writings on British fascism, Padmore drew on the Black experience of racial and colonial oppression to advance “an expansive idea of fascism” as well as to highlight the contradictions between British democracy and British imperialism.⁴⁰ For instance, he saw no contradiction or naivety in Erroll’s belief in fascism without dictatorship; it merely reflected his familiarity with the racist authoritarianism of colonial governments, one that left white settlers’s liberty intact. Herein lies the crucial insight of Padmore’s anti-colonial anti-fascist analysis, and one that subsequent generations of Black British political thinkers would take up and develop—that democracy for white Britons in the metropole and white settlers in British colonies could co-exist alongside, and even incubate, a fascism targeted at Black people.

British fascism in the era of “Keep Britain White”

By the end of the Second World War, the center of anti-colonial political organizing had shifted decisively from the kind of expatriate activist communities in the metropole, of which Padmore was part, to mass political struggles in the colonies. After maintaining his career as an anti-colonial political journalist throughout the war, Padmore himself made a similar move. He helped to organize the Fifth Pan African Congress, held in Manchester in October 1945, an event very much focused on the mass struggle against colonialism in Africa. Then, a few years before his death in 1959, Padmore moved to Ghana to act as an advisor to President Kwame Nkrumah. These shifts left a “vacuum in black political activity” that was not filled until the emergence of a new Black British activist community and popular political press from the late 1950s.⁴¹

These activists operated in a very different context. Their political priorities differed from those of the interwar anti-colonial movement; while the readers and contributors to new magazines like the *West Indian Gazette* remained interested in colonial affairs, unlike the anti-colonial activists of the interwar period, they were no longer sojourning imperial subjects passing through the metropole. They came to Britain as citizens “of the United Kingdom and Colonies” under the terms of the 1948 British Nationality Act and thus

³⁸ Padmore, “The Truth About the Murdered Fascist Earl,” 3.

³⁹ Schwarz, “George Padmore,” 142.

⁴⁰ Schwarz, “George Padmore,” 141.

⁴¹ Kalbir Shukra, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain* (Pluto, 1998), 10.

faced different, but related, political struggles. And their analysis of fascism reflected this. Whereas Padmore insisted on the affinities between European fascism and British imperialism in his anti-colonial campaigning, activists like Claudia Jones and contributors to her *West Indian Gazette* pointed to British “fascism” in the form of the anti-immigration campaigns of home-grown fascist organizations as well as in the form of legislation restricting Commonwealth migration, and reactionary foreign policy in the context of decolonization and the Cold War. They saw British fascism as a response to the loss of imperial power and the perceived challenges posed by newly independent African, Caribbean, and Asian nations as well as by newly enfranchised Black British citizens. They continued to think of British fascism as something tethered to and born out of the history of Britain and its Empire but added their own spin. Their analyses also featured uses of the term “fascism” to suggest a symbiotic relationship between the structural violence of immigration legislation and the street violence of racist riots, murder, and assault.

Jones, a veteran activist and political journalist, founded the *West Indian Gazette* in 1958, a few short months before racist rioting in Nottingham and Notting Hill later that year.⁴² In many ways, her early life and political journey mirror Padmore’s. Originally from Trinidad, Jones’s parents had migrated to the United States when she was young. She grew up in Harlem and, by the 1940s, had become a leading activist and theoretician in the CPUSA. During the 1930s, Jones had participated in CPUSA campaigns in solidarity with the Scottsboro Boys—nine African American teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women—and against Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia.

In the early 1950s, Jones was arrested by the US authorities under anti-communist legislation and sentenced to prison and then deportation. Solidarity campaigners eventually managed to secure her release on grounds of ill health. After successful negotiations by Jones and her legal team, she was able to voluntarily leave the United States for Britain instead of facing deportation to Trinidad.⁴³ As a result of these experiences, Jones was accustomed to thinking of fascism in expansive terms. As a CPUSA activist, she developed an analysis of the growth of fascism in the United States from the end of the Second World War, viewing it as a combination of an authoritarian intensification of violently repressive “anti-Blackness”; “capitalist imperialism”; militarism, warmongering, and nuclear proliferation; and anti-communism and the suppression of labor organizing.⁴⁴

Upon her arrival in London in December 1955, Jones initially came into the orbit of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Party activists received her warmly, helping her to find medical treatment, unsuccessfully attempting to get her a passport, and assisting her with finding accommodation and employment. However, Jones grew dismayed by the Party’s failure to organize among Caribbean workers in Britain and its half-hearted commitment to anti-colonialism. She was further repulsed by the way its leadership repeatedly sidelined her and by the racism she reportedly experienced from some party members.⁴⁵ Keeping her involvement with the CPGB minimal, she threw her activist energies into organizing among Britain’s Black community. In its first year, the *West Indian Gazette* enjoyed a circulation of 30,000 copies: it was likely read by a significant portion of Britain’s fledgling Caribbean community in addition to the audience who purchased the copies sold back in the

⁴² Bill Schwarz, “Claudia Jones and the *West Indian Gazette*,” *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2003): 264–85, at 268–69; Donald Hinds, “The *West Indian Gazette*: Claudia Jones and the black press in Britain,” *Race & Class* 50, no. 1 (2008): 88–97.

⁴³ Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Duke, 2007), 140–42.

⁴⁴ Charisse Burden-Stelly, “Claudia Jones, the Longue Durée of McCarthyism, and the Threat of US Fascism,” *The Journal of Intersectionality* 3, no. 1 (2019): 46–66, at 51–53.

⁴⁵ Marika Sherwood, *Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1999), ch. 3.

Caribbean.⁴⁶ Although this settled down to a more stable and regular circulation of 10,000, the *Gazette* (and its editor Jones) came to occupy a special position at the center of a postwar Black British political network that brought together several different community groups and associations in the midst of increasing racial violence.

The racist riots in Notting Hill took place over several days and nights during late August and early September 1958 that saw white rioters attack Black residents on the streets and in their homes. Several British fascist groups were active in Notting Hill in the months before and after the riots, working to exacerbate racial tensions and provoke racist violence. These included Oswald Mosley's Union Movement (UM); the White Defence League, a new group founded by neo-Nazi Colin Jordan; and the National Labour Party, founded by John Bean and John Tyndall, former members of the League of Empire Loyalists, a group that had been founded by ex-BUF member A.K. Chesterton. All were committed to, in the words of the slogan they popularized, "Keep Britain White." Tensions remained especially high in Notting Hill after the riots, which became national news. Seeking to capitalize on the fruits of the UM's white supremacist political agitation, Mosley campaigned to become member of Parliament for North Kensington in the October 1959 general election. In May that year, a group of white youths fatally stabbed an Antiguan carpenter named Kelso Cochrane in the middle of a street in North Kensington. The case was never definitively solved, but rumors circulated that the killer had been a UM member.⁴⁷ The campaigns in response to Cochrane's murder, and the work to organize his funeral, were some of the first anti-racist campaigns in which the *West Indian Gazette* played a role, alongside Amy Ashwood Garvey, David Pitt, and several other prominent Black British political figures.⁴⁸

As well as publicizing anti-racist campaigns and acting as a source of community news, the *Gazette* also featured commentary and analysis on current affairs in Britain, its remaining colonies, and beyond. The *Gazette* reported on the activities of Mosley and other British fascist groups and monitored the parliamentary campaigns of anti-immigration backbench Conservative MP Cyril Osborne.⁴⁹ Contributors to the *Gazette* argued that these two wings of British racism—on the one hand, "fascist-racialist" and, on the other, "Tory"—constituted an unofficial political alliance, referring to them on one occasion together as "the vanguard of the campaign" against Commonwealth migration.⁵⁰ They maintained that politicians like Osborne and other government ministers advocating and instituting legislation to control immigration emboldened and encouraged British fascist organizations; in other words, the structural violence of state legislation acted as the starting gun for physical violence in the streets.⁵¹

Similar themes characterized an editorial, written by Claudia Jones for the November 1961 issue of the *Gazette*, attacking the bill that would go on to become the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act. Jones dubbed the bill, which proposed restrictions on the

⁴⁶ Asher Hoyles and Martin Hoyles, *Caribbean Publishing in Britain: A Tribute to Arif Ali* (Hansib Publications, 2015), 38; Naomi Oppenheim, "'Writing the Wrongs': Caribbean Publishing in Post-war Britain from a Historical Perspective" (PhD diss., UCL, 2022), 158.

⁴⁷ Mark Olden, *Murder in Notting Hill* (Zero, 2011), 71–73.

⁴⁸ Perry, *London Is the Place for Me*, 135–36.

⁴⁹ "'Send Jamaicans Home' Mosley Call Condemned," *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 3, no. 1, August 1960, 2; "Mr. Osborne; Here Are the Facts!," *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 3, no. 2, September 1960, 4; "The Commons Debate On: Migration Restriction," *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 3, no. 6, April 1961, 2.

⁵⁰ "The New Arguments Against Migration Restriction," *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 4, no. 9, September 1961, 7; "Facts About Migration," *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 4, no. 12, December 1961, 1.

⁵¹ "No Room at the Inn," *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 4, no. 12, December 1961, 1.

immigration of Commonwealth citizens and required prospective migrants to apply for work vouchers, “Mr Butler’s Colour-Bar Bill.”⁵² She maintained that

... the worst feature of this ... Bill is the green light to the perpetuation, stimulus and encouragement to racialism that it gives to racial prejudice in theory and practice; to the fascist and “lunatic fringe” and the advocates of **apartheid** everywhere.⁵³

Jones referenced “apartheid” here in order to render explicit, by way of reference to South Africa, the political and legislative dynamics of a subtler, implicit British racism.⁵⁴ She further placed the Conservative government’s legislation within a broader continuum of racism that spoke to the experiences of Black people within Britain and across its Empire. Apartheid here becomes not just the specific policy of the South African government but also a project for the defense and maintenance of white supremacy in the metropole. Within this project, Jones accorded Britain’s fascist movement the role of enthusiastic foot-soldiers.

The invoking of “apartheid” alongside “fascism” by activists around the *Gazette* also illustrates the continuation and modification of Black anti-imperial anti-fascism in this period. If earlier generations of Black activists saw fascism developing out of colonial rule, then Jones and her comrades saw fascism developing out of, and in reaction against, decolonization. In an editorial from 1962, Jones wrote that the British government appeared to be resorting to “fascism” in an effort to resist the “wind of change,” an explicit reference to Harold Macmillan’s 1960 speech in South Africa that provoked it to withdraw from the Commonwealth rather than alter its racist regime.⁵⁵ She saw signs of this “fascism” in Britain’s alliance with Belgium, Northern Rhodesia, and the Union of South Africa during the Congo crisis, and accused Britain of supporting Portugal during the Angolan War of Independence. The article connected this to various other elements of British policy both abroad and at home, including the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill and the Conservative government’s industrial relations policy. For Jones, in its struggle to govern a changing Britain in a rapidly globalizing world, the British state was resorting to attempts to “scuttle democracy itself, and institute fascism.”⁵⁶

Black Power and British fascism

The *West Indian Gazette* continued to appear for a year after Jones’s death in 1964. It petered out in the middle of a moment of transition in Black British politics. From the mid-1960s, visits to Britain by African American radicals—including Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Stokeley Carmichael—stimulated more radical Black British political aspirations.⁵⁷ At the same time, intensifying open racism in British politics and society—marked especially by

⁵² Claudia Jones, “Butler’s Colour-Bar Bill Mocks Commonwealth,” *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 4, no. 11, November 1961, 1–2, at 1.

⁵³ Jones, “Butler’s Colour-Bar Bill,” 2. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ On Black British anti-apartheid activism and Jones’ involvement in it, see Elizabeth M. Williams, *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (I.B. Tauris, 2015).

⁵⁵ “Editorial,” *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 4, no. 14, February 1962, 4.

⁵⁶ “Editorial,” 4.

⁵⁷ Joe Street, “Malcolm X, Smethwick, and the Influence of the African American Freedom Struggle on British Race Relations in the 1960s,” *Journal of Black Studies* 38, no. 6 (2008): 932–50; Graeme Abernethy, “‘Not Just an American Problem’: Malcolm X in Britain,” *Atlantic Studies* 7, no. 3 (2010): 285–307; Stephen Tuck, “Malcolm X’s Visit to Oxford University: U.S. Civil Rights, Black Britain, and the Special Relationship on Race,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 1 (2013): 76–103; Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (California, 2019), 24–30; Rob Waters, “‘Britain is No Longer White’: James Baldwin as a Witness to Postcolonial Britain,” *African American Review* 46, no. 4 (2013): 715–30.

the election of anti-immigration Conservative MP Peter Griffiths following a racist campaign in the 1964 Smethwick by-election, Enoch Powell's 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech, and a new Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1968—made the task of resisting white supremacy all the more urgent. In this atmosphere, a new style of Black politics superseded the moderate strategy of organizations like the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), chaired by Claudia Jones's old associate, David Pitt. CARD was modelled on the American organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and similar integrationist civil rights activism and focused its energies on mounting formal legal challenges to racial discrimination.⁵⁸ Amid internecine conflict between moderates and radicals that led to the disintegration of CARD in 1967, British Black Power was born.

Britain's first avowedly Black Power organization was the Universal Coloured People's Association (UCPA). The Nigerian writer Obi Egbuna founded the UCPA in June 1967 shortly before Stokely Carmichael's influential visit to London in July 1967. From one of their earliest pamphlets, the UCPA understood "fascism" in expansive terms. Commenting on current affairs in *Black Power in Britain*, they wrote that the disagreements between Britain and Rhodesia, its erstwhile and recalcitrant settler colony, over the latter's unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 was "not a quarrel between fascism and anti-fascism, but a quarrel between frankness and hypocrisy within a fascist framework."⁵⁹ For UCPA members, this clash between the British government's desire to salvage a liberal Commonwealth from the imperial wreckage, and the highly illiberal white Rhodesian regime's desire to safeguard its privileges, spoke to the global issue of what they called—and capitalized for emphasis—"INTERNATIONAL WHITE POWER." They lumped together Rhodesia's white supremacist rebellion with other displays of "white power" in Canada, in the form of restrictions against Asian immigration, and in Australia, in the form of the "White Australia" policy," under the heading of "Anglo-Saxon fascism."

The concept of fascism remained at the center of political thought and analysis as Black Power in Britain developed into a varied and nationwide movement dominated by activists of Caribbean descent, along with some Asian and a small number of African members.⁶⁰ Around a year after founding the UCPA, amid "internal divisions," Egbuna left the organization and founded the Black Panther Movement (BPM)—inspired by, but not affiliated to, the African American Black Panther Party.⁶¹ His leadership of the organization was cut short following his arrest in July 1968 and, by 1970, a young Trinidadian biochemistry student named Althea Jones-LeCointe emerged as the de facto leader of the British Panthers.⁶² Under her leadership, the BPM became a highly active community organization, and its activities achieved a level of reach and influence quite out of proportion with its comparatively small membership.⁶³ Jones-LeCointe's BPM were soon joined by the Black Unity and Freedom Party (formed out of the remnants of the UCPA) in 1970 and the Black Liberation Front (an offshoot of the BPM) in 1971.⁶⁴ There were political (and sometimes personal) differences between the disparate organizations that made up the British Black

⁵⁸ Shukra, *Black Politics in Britain*, 20–21.

⁵⁹ *Black Power in Britain* (Universal Coloured People's Association, 1967), 4.

⁶⁰ Waters, *Thinking Black*, 34–35; Rosie Wild, "Black Was the Colour of Our Fight. Black Power in Britain, 1955–1976" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2008), 69.

⁶¹ Wild, "Black Was the Colour of Our Fight", 90; R. E. R. Bunce and Paul Field, "Obi B. Egbuna, C. L. R. James and the Birth of Black Power in Britain: Black Radicalism in Britain 1967–72," *Twentieth Century British History* 22, no. 3 (2011): 391–414, at 403; Anne-Marie Angelo, "The Black Panthers in London, 1967–1972: A Diasporic Struggle Navigates the Black Atlantic," *Radical History Review* 103 (2009): 17–35, at 22.

⁶² Bunce and Field, "Obi B. Egbuna, C. L. R. James and the Birth of Black Power in Britain," 407.

⁶³ Anne-Marie Angelo, "'Black Oppressed People All over the World Are One': The British Black Panthers' Grassroots Internationalism, 1969–73," *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2018): 67–97, at 72–75.

⁶⁴ Wild, "Black Was the Colour of Our Fight", 86, 104.

Power movement, but their activists also remained in close contact and collaborated on campaigns, demonstrations, conferences, and workshops.

They united in the face not only of an emboldened open racism in British politics and society, but also of a new union of white supremacist organizations in the form of the National Front (NF). The NF was founded in early 1967 after a merger of several British fascist groups. During the 1970s, they attracted worrying levels of support and were talked of as Britain's fourth largest party in terms of projected electoral performance. While fears of its electoral success ultimately came to nothing, beyond the ballot box the Front represented a physical threat to the lives of Black Britons. Black Power organizations monitored the activities of the NF and other white supremacist organizations, reporting on their demonstrations within and beyond London.⁶⁵ These reports often displayed a detailed understanding of the NF's ideology and political program but did not regard these in isolation from the broader spectrum of British racism.⁶⁶

Britain's Black Power activists further developed a Black "theory of fascism" in the British context based on their experiences and theoretical reflections. In doing so, they drew considerable inspiration from the US Black Panther Party's anti-fascist campaigns and from the writings of two thinkers close to the Panthers—George Jackson and Angela Davis. In the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party in the USA mounted a series of "anti-fascist" campaigns and even sought to bring together other left-wing radicals in a United Front against Fascism.⁶⁷ Drawing on Marxist interpretations of fascism and informed by "an earlier antifascist discourse" developed by intellectuals such as Du Bois, Césaire, Padmore, and Jones, they saw US fascism as the culmination of the country's history of racist violence, embodied not just by the Klan or by the lynch mob but by the state—especially the police and the carceral system.⁶⁸ The US Panthers and their allies spoke of "fascism" and also dealt in accusations of genocide, arguing that a more systematized and intentional process of racist violence was either already underway or imminent. Jackson and Davis, two political thinkers who had been persecuted, prosecuted, and incarcerated by the authorities, built on this idea. For Jackson, fascism was already well established in America, the result of a process of racial violence, state centralization, and the neutering and co-optation of the labor movement stretching back to the earlier twentieth century.⁶⁹ Davis, on the other hand, theorized that fascism was "incipient," developing, but not yet fully developed, out of the new Nixonian right-wing social order of the early 1970s United States. Jackson and Davis both looked to law enforcement and prisons as the wellsprings of modern fascism in America, especially because of the way that they treated African Americans with a disproportionate and often life-threatening severity.⁷⁰ While fascism primarily targeted non-white Americans, they warned that it would very soon begin to extend its most brutal practices to the wider American working class.

British Black Power activists demonstrated in solidarity with their American brethren and especially in the struggles to free Jackson and Davis from prison.⁷¹ They also adapted their insights to British conditions, conceiving of British "fascism" as a hydra whose

⁶⁵ "Smash Growing Fascism," *Black Voice*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1972, 1, 12.

⁶⁶ "The National Front Threat," *Grassroots*, June/July 1977, 12–13.

⁶⁷ Vials, *Haunted by Hitler*, 174–80.

⁶⁸ Vials, *Haunted by Hitler*, 165.

⁶⁹ George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Random House, 1972), 162–74.

⁷⁰ Angela Y. Davis, "Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation," in *If They Come in the Morning...: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Angela Y. Davis (Verso, [1971] 2016), 27–43, at 37–38, 41–42; Angela Y. Davis, "An Appeal," in *If They Come in the Morning*, 142–50, at 148.

⁷¹ "Attempt to Railroad Three Black Brothers to the Gas-Chamber," *Black People's News Service*, May–June 1971, 4; "Penny Jackson—Sister of George Jackson," *Black People's News Service*, May–June 1971, 2; "International News—America," *Black People's News Service*, May–June 1971, 4.

many heads represented different manifestations of individual, institutional, and structural racism within both the British state and wider society. One “head” represented the NF, another the police, another the government, another the judiciary, and so on. In the hands of Black Power activists, “fascism” became a conceptual tool for comprehending and conveying their experience of “street” and state racism as different expressions of the same historically entrenched problem.

In one sense it was not accurate to dub the police or the judiciary or other aspects of the British state “fascist.” All were subject to various theoretical checks and balances that did not exist, even theoretically, under the fascist regimes of interwar Europe. And yet, the contents of the Black Power press testify to the ways in which Black British people experienced Britain’s ostensibly liberal-democratic state and society as “fascist”: unrepresented and unable to fully participate in democratic politics; left unprotected in the face of racist beatings by police officers; targeted by a campaign of terroristic fire-bombings by unknown assailants; and disenfranchised by means of racist legislation. Those writing in Black Power publications saw fascism emanating from *within* Britain’s liberal-democratic state wielded as a tool for the exclusion, subordination, and—in some cases—extermination of Black Britons.

Contained within the British Black Power press is an insight into, and analysis of, racist violence in 1970s Britain that is as radical as it is incisive. Stephen Ashe, Satnam Virdee, and Laurence Brown have argued that “racist violence has been a constant feature of Britain’s post-war social and political landscape.”⁷² And yet, this phenomenon has been consistently overlooked and underestimated in official statistics. In addition, they note that “such violence has been commonly misunderstood as occurring in a vacuum, detached from structural and institutional racism.”⁷³ Further, they note that responsibility for racist violence is usually attributed to “the extreme Right or an anomic and lunatic minority, while at the same time being framed as something that is random, sporadic, unpredictable and opportunistic.”⁷⁴

A very different account of racist violence appears in the BPM, BUFP, and BLM’s newspapers. In offering accounts of racist violence, British Black Power activists named it as “fascist.” They did so without knowing for certain whether the perpetrators were card-carrying fascists, that is, members of the NF or other such organizations. In many cases, the culprits in the incidents they covered were serving, uniformed police officers.⁷⁵ For instance, among the litany of reported police assaults documented in the Black Power press was the murder of British Nigerian David Oluwale by two Leeds City Police officers in 1969. Reporting on the investigation into his death, the BUFP’s *Black Voice* drew a political lesson from Oluwale’s end, interpreting it as a sign that in Britain, “Fascism is growing by leaps and bounds.”⁷⁶

In calling Oluwale’s assailants and other violently racist police officers “fascist,” the editorial in *Black Voice* was making an argument about the function and character of state power in British society, namely, that it was violently and disproportionately wielded against Black British citizens. The editorial argued that the kind of police violence that had killed Oluwale was part of “the same offensive” as assaults carried out by the NF and other unaffiliated racists, all calculated “to intimidate and try to subdue the Black worker.”⁷⁷ The

⁷² Stephen Ashe, Satnam Virdee and Laurence Brown, “Striking Back against Racist Violence in the East End of London, 1968–1970,” *Race & Class* 58, no. 1 (2016): 34–54, at 35.

⁷³ Ashe, Virdee and Brown, “Striking Back,” 36.

⁷⁴ Ashe, Virdee and Brown, “Striking Back,” 36.

⁷⁵ “Enough is Enough,” *Black People’s News Service*, February 1971, 1–2; “Action Now Campaign,” *Freedom News*, vol. 3, no. 2, 4 March 1972, 1.

⁷⁶ “Editorial,” *Black Voice*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, 3.

⁷⁷ “Editorial,” 3.

only distinction British Black Power activists made between police racism and “unofficial” street racism was whether the attackers were wearing a uniform—between “uniformed racists” and “non-uniformed racists” as the BPM’s *Freedom News* put it.⁷⁸

When it came to racism beyond the police, in politics and wider society, Black Power activists asserted that there was a symbiotic relationship between different manifestations of white supremacy in Britain. Their reports of individual acts of racist violence alongside racist brutality by the police and the introduction of legislation placing new restrictions on immigration and citizenship illustrated the working of this relationship, with one expression of white supremacy encouraging and/or accelerating others. Black Power activists’s understanding of this relationship was evident in their coverage of a spate of fire-bombings of Black homes, community spaces, and businesses that left Black people scarred for life and, in some cases, led to the deaths of very young children. Black Power activists wrote about these fire-bombings during the 1970s as part of a “fascist” campaign of racist violence, pointing to examples in Moss Side in Manchester, Wolverhampton, Acton, Liverpool, Birmingham, and South and East London.⁷⁹

Articles and editorials in *Black Voice* were forthright in their political analysis of the fire-bombings. They claimed that they were being carried out by “group[s] of fascist[s]” who were “simply put[ing] into practice the thoughts and beliefs of Enoch Powell and his henchmen.”⁸⁰ They further connected individual “fascists” with racist politicians and anti-migrant political policies like the 1971 Immigration Act. The act of fire-bombing, as one *Black Voice* editorial had it, “is intended to be, and must be seen as, a positive contribution towards the government’s repatriation scheme, for it is they who have created the fascist conditions in which hoodlums thrive.”⁸¹ For BUFP activists, this campaign was connected to broader efforts in “the West” to prop up white supremacy and capitalism in the face of struggles for self-determination across the world. They thus viewed terroristic fire-bombings against the Black community as both a concerted campaign and as part of a series of “panic measures at home and abroad.”⁸²

Another article in the same publication contained an indictment of those it argued were responsible for the fire-bombing of a property on Sunderland Road in the Forest Hill area of the Borough of Lewisham, one of the first such incidents to attract the attention of the Black British press. As well as drawing direct comparisons between the wreckage wrought by the fire and “the ovens of Belsen and Dachau during Hitler’s Fascists reign,” they charged Powell and other Powellite MPs, supporters of the Conservative Monday Club, several of the area’s local councilors, and members of the National Front with “plotting genocide.”⁸³ They placed this “genocidal” campaign within a broader historical frame, beginning with Cochrane’s murder in 1959 and ending with the Sunderland Road bombing.⁸⁴ Extending beyond the confines of Black British history, the article also considered the increase in racist violence as the turning of a metaphorical safety valve to relieve the social and economic pressure of a crisis of capitalism—much like, in their view, the violent settler-colonial expansion of the nineteenth century or the Nazi’s brutal quest for *lebensraum*.

Charges of fascism and genocide represented neither superficial hyperbole nor conspiracy-theorizing but the articulation of a political argument about the nature of white supremacy in Britain. At the root of this argument was the assertion that there

⁷⁸ “Enough is Enough,” 1.

⁷⁹ “Bomb Attacks on Black People’s Party,” *Black People’s News Service*, February 1971, 1–2, at 1; “Fire Bombings of Black Homes Spread,” *Grassroots*, vol. 1, no. 5, ca. 1971, 1.

⁸⁰ “Editorial,” *Black Voice*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1971, 2.

⁸¹ “Editorial,” 2.

⁸² “Editorial,” 2.

⁸³ “The Bombing,” *Black Voice*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1971, 5.

⁸⁴ “Genocide—The Plot—The Crimes,” *Black Voice*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1971.

were essential affinities between different manifestations of racist violence. Whether it was the 1971 Immigration Act restricting the migration and citizenship rights of people of color, or fire-bombings enacted or inspired by the National Front, or the racist behavior of police officers, Britain's Black Power activists argued that the aim was the same.⁸⁵ They all represented different ways of asserting a conception of Britain as a "white" country.

As well as the ways in which wider British society was metaphorically or figuratively "fascist," the Black Power press also accused certain institutions of more direct and explicit forms of collusion and collaboration with Britain's white supremacist movement. The BLF's *Grassroots* newspaper carried reports of NF infiltration into schools and on members of teaching staff with NF connections.⁸⁶ When it came to British "fascist" infiltration into the realms of law and order, as well as the repeated accusations of "fascism," Black Power activists publicized the more open and documented fascist sympathies of judges, prison officers, and others. When Lord Justice Frederick Lawton became chair of the Criminal Law Revision Committee in 1977, *Grassroots* and *Black Voice* published profiles of him.⁸⁷ They noted that Lawton had been a member of Mosley's BUF in the 1930s and had even stood as a BUF parliamentary candidate for North Hammersmith.⁸⁸ *Grassroots* reported that Lawton had since earned a reputation as a racist and highly draconian judge. The presence of this apparently unreconstructed and formerly card-carrying fascist in Britain's legal establishment served as further evidence of what *Grassroots* described as "the drift towards Fascism under the government of James Callaghan."⁸⁹ Beyond the courts, Black Power newspapers provided ex-prisoners with a platform to expose the presence of NF members and supporters within Britain's prison service. The testimony of Black prisoners featured stories about warders wearing NF tie pins, proclaiming their support for the NF in elections, and otherwise invoking the name and cause of the NF in meting out violence against Black inmates.⁹⁰

Black anti-fascism and the British anti-fascist movement

Over the course of the 1970s, the agitation and electioneering of the NF made it a more visible and threatening presence in British society, and the organization became a concern beyond Britain's African Caribbean and South Asian communities. Organized anti-fascist activity began to expand from its traditional organizational base in communist and labor organizations into a separate mass movement in the mid-1970s.⁹¹ Across London—memorably in Red Lion Square in 1974, Lewisham in 1977, and Southall in 1979—this new anti-fascist movement clashed with members and supporters of the NF and the police.

In this context, Black radical analyses of fascism and those they influenced collided with conceptions of anti-fascism on the broader Left.⁹² An exchange of articles between Maurice

⁸⁵ Odette Russel, "Deportations: Number of Forced Repatriations Continue to Rise," *Grassroots*, April/May 1977, 1.

⁸⁶ "N.F. Threatens Black Pupils," *Grassroots*, vol. 3, no. 4, n.d., 1, 4; "NF Teacher," *Grassroots*, vol. 3, no. 5, n.d., 10.

⁸⁷ "Fascist 'Justice' Lawton," *Black Voice*, vol. 2, no. 4, n.d., 8; "Natural Progression," *Grassroots*, February–March 1977, 2.

⁸⁸ For Lawton's candidate profile, see "Prospective Parliamentary British Union Parliamentary Candidates," *Action*, no. 41, 28 November 1936, 7.

⁸⁹ "Natural Progression," 2.

⁹⁰ "Black Prisoners Threatened," *Black Voice*, vol. 8, no. 1, n.d., 3; "The Terrorists of Wandsworth Prison," *Grassroots*, October/November 1977, 1.

⁹¹ Michael Higgs, "From the Street to the State: Making Anti-fascism Anti-racist in 1970s Britain," *Race & Class* 58, no. 1 (2016): 66–84, at 71.

⁹² For a recent exploration of these clashes and exchanges, see Alfie Hancox, "The Anti-Nazi League, 'Another White Organization'? British Black Radicals against Racial Fascism," *Historical Materialism* 31, no. 3 (2023): 276–303.

Ludmer, anti-racist campaigner and founder of the anti-fascist journal *Searchlight*, and Ian Macdonald, a barrister who had represented some of the Black Power activists during the 1970–71 Mangrove Trial, provides an illustration of this conceptual clash.⁹³ Both articles were published in 1975 in the Institute for Race Relations's journal *Race & Class*. The central thrust of Macdonald's argument, which drew on the writings of George Jackson and Angela Davis, was that "Attacking the National Front without attacking the rest of the state apparatus seems to be quite a pointless existence."⁹⁴

He wrote:

The definition of fascism is not some academic point. It is a very practical problem of revolutionary direction. Who is your main target[?] Under the old left ... definition, the target of the revolutionary movement becomes the defence of democracy and of so-called democratic rights. At best, this limits the scope of creativity of the revolutionary movement to defensive actions, at worst, it commits it to a defence of the *status quo* and is utterly counterrevolutionary.⁹⁵

Ludmer issued a rejoinder in the next issue of *Race & Class*, complaining of ...

... the way that the word fascist has been hurled around, with almost gay abandon, as an invective to fit anyone on the right or in the establishment to whom we are strongly opposed. This debasing of the word fascist is more than mere linguistic slackness, it reflects a lack of political understanding which does no service to anti-fascist forces.⁹⁶

While he insisted on the importance of anti-fascism as a separate struggle to defend the working class's hard-won democratic rights, Ludmer did not deny that broader anti-racist struggles and multiracial campaigns to "eradicate imperialist ideas" were essential.⁹⁷ However, besides taking issue with Jackson's analyses of fascism, Ludmer did not really engage at all with the arguments of other Black activists who claimed that they were, in terms of their racialized experience of British state and society, *already living under fascism*. He folded the experiences of Britain's Black and Asian communities into those of the broader working class in the context of the struggle for socialism, rather than appreciating that they formed a particular section of that class with an equally specific experience of capitalism and white supremacy, reflected in their different, not deficient, "political understanding" of fascism.

Writing a few years later in the independent theoretical journal *Black Liberator*, Colin Prescod brought this different political understanding to bear in a critique of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL). The ANL was founded by the Socialist Workers Party following the so-called "Battle of Lewisham" in August 1977 as a broad-based and politically diverse campaign to ensure the NF's defeat in the next general election. The organization focused primarily on neutralizing the electoral threat of the NF through campaigning that stressed their exotic extremism, associating them with Nazism and the memory of the Holocaust.⁹⁸ This proved an effective means of realizing the ANL's immediate aims yet, as Prescod argued, it let racism beyond the Front off the political hook:

⁹³ Higgs, "From the Street to the State," 79.

⁹⁴ Ian Macdonald, "Some Thoughts on Fascism Today," *Race & Class* 16, no. 3 (1975): 295–304, at 303.

⁹⁵ Macdonald, "Some Thoughts on Fascism," 298.

⁹⁶ Maurice Ludmer, "A Critical Reply to Ian Macdonald's 'Some Thoughts on Fascism Today'," *Race & Class* 16, no. 4 (1975): 418–21, at 418.

⁹⁷ Ludmer, "A Critical Reply," 420.

⁹⁸ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Routledge, 2002), 170–75.

Fascism is a big word. Europeans have it in their history, their civilization and it frightens them. They tell us that it is terrible, and that in a “fascist state” the law works adversely against the masses, and that people are humiliated, persecuted, brutalised and murdered, with no protection except self-defence. We’ve got something to tell Europeans—their fascism is still alive and kicking in their civilization. The Black masses have been seeing the “fascist” face of the state in Britain since the 1950’s. Perhaps those Europeans who fear and abhor fascism, and who look back to their 1930’s for their fascism, were they to look closely at the black experience in Britain, would find that they have been looking the wrong way for the resurgence of fascism.⁹⁹

Prescod cited “the late George Jackson’s analysis” of fascism as a means of asserting the overlooked importance of the Black British experience. For Prescod, the exclusion of “the black experience in Britain” from anti-fascist politics placed fascism at a safe temporal and geographical distance, separated from British political culture by decades and held at bay by the English Channel. On the contrary, Black Power activists insisted that fascism in Britain was both indigenous and alive within the formal structures of British democracy as well as on the so-called “lunatic fringe.” Writing in late 1978 in the context of the looming threat of Thatcherism, he further warned that though the state’s expanding repressive powers were, at present, mobilized mainly against Britain’s Black community, they would soon be “used against the entire working class.”¹⁰⁰

A crisis by any other name

In terms of its formal structures, British parliamentary democracy did not collapse in the 1970s and British fascism did not win electoral power in 1979. In analyzing and articulating their opposition to the ascendant and, with that year’s general election, triumphant forces of Thatcherism, some Black intellectuals deliberately avoided the term “fascism.” Stuart Hall and the co-authors of 1978’s *Policing the Crisis* derided “[t]he simple slogans of ‘fascism’” as “more than useless” since “they cover up, conveniently, everything which is most important to keep in view.”¹⁰¹ Hall and his co-authors focused instead on “the construction of an authoritarian consensus” in British society and politics since the 1960s. They argued that this was stimulated by a crisis of the capitalist state and economy and shaped by a series of disparate moral panics over everything from youth culture, obscenity, trade union militancy, the conflict in Northern Ireland, Britain’s Black community, and Black Power.¹⁰² A key aspect of this process lay in the way it emanated from “both above and below” with “each step towards a more authoritarian posture ... accompanied by a powerful groundswell of popular legitimacy.”¹⁰³

Hall elaborated on this argument in his essay “The Great Moving Right Show,” written a short time later. Again, he attacked the lazy invocation of the term “fascism” by the organized Left, cautioning “against the satisfactions which sometimes flow from applying simplifying analytic schemes to complex events.”¹⁰⁴ By doing so, he added, “[w]e may

⁹⁹ Colin Prescod, “Black People Against State Harassment (BASH) Campaign—A Report,” *The Black Liberator*, no. 1, December 1978, 5–7, at 5.

¹⁰⁰ Prescod, “Black People Against State Harassment (BASH) Campaign,” 5.

¹⁰¹ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law & Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1978), 320.

¹⁰² Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, viii, 233–72.

¹⁰³ Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 321.

¹⁰⁴ “The Great Moving Right Show (1979),” in Stuart Hall, *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, ed. Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Michael Rustin and Bill Schwarz (Duke, 2017), 172–86, at 174.

miss precisely what is specific to this exceptional form of the crisis of the capitalist state by mere name-calling.”¹⁰⁵ For him, talk of fascism—even where, as in Black Power publications, it did not simplistically invoke “classical fascism”—placed too much emphasis on authoritarianism and not enough on the populist character of the authoritarian shift. What mattered was the way in which the Conservative government’s weakening of democracy (stopping well short of its abolition) involved the construction of “an active popular consent.”¹⁰⁶ In this, Hall was inspired by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and, specifically, by his insistence on appreciating new developments on the political Right on their own terms and in their own context.¹⁰⁷ Hall’s concept of “authoritarian populism” also drew heavily on the work of another continental European Marxist thinker, Nicos Poulantzas. Hall’s thinking was guided by Poulantzas’s idea of “authoritarian statism”—the simultaneous growth of authoritarianism and preservation of the liberal-democratic capitalist state—which Poulantzas, in turn, differentiated from fascism.¹⁰⁸ When it came to the British situation, Hall argued that however much their activities overlapped with the growing authoritarianism of the state, the NF had played little more than “a ‘walk-on’ part in this drama.”¹⁰⁹

As a way of thinking about the politics of race in modern British history, the “expansive,” unsystematic, and impressionistic understandings of fascism developed by Black activists enable a different and generative way of thinking about British racism and British fascism in relational terms. However, Hall’s incisive critique is a reminder that, for all that such constructions can or might reveal, there are other things that—in their radical and impatient imprecision—they obscure. These go beyond the specificities of Hall’s concept of “authoritarian populism.” The idea that Britain’s fascist movement was formally yet covertly in league with parliamentary political Right, as some Black Power publications suggested, collapses all sorts of political nuances. At the level of both the leadership and the rank-and-file, the NF did repeatedly flirt with aspects of the Tory Right during the 1970s, including the nebulous Powellite movement and the Monday Club, which opposed decolonization. Nevertheless, the NF distinguished their particular creed of white nationalism from the Tories’s increasingly free-market-oriented agenda, while also fretting that the Conservative Party’s turn to policies opposed to immigration and European integration would deny the NF electoral political space.¹¹⁰ The NF also had a long, complicated, and contradictory relationship with Enoch Powell, concurring with him about immigration, but fundamentally disagreeing with him on the question of state intervention in the economy.¹¹¹ Bizarrely, the NF even implicated Powell in some of their more elaborate conspiracy theories about the control of world politics by secret societies and Jewish power.¹¹² In addition to this, there is also the longer history of what Mark Pitchford called the Conservative Party’s “blocking role.”¹¹³ Regardless of the extent to which, at different times and to differing degrees, the Party appropriated fascist themes and rhetoric, it expended a lot of administrative

¹⁰⁵ “The Great Moving Right Show,” 175.

¹⁰⁶ “The Great Moving Right Show,” 174.

¹⁰⁷ Stuart Hall, “Gramsci and Us [1987],” in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (Verso, 1988), 160–73, at 163.

¹⁰⁸ Stuart Hall, “Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al,” *New Left Review* 151 (1985): 115–24, at 116–18.

¹⁰⁹ “The Great Moving Right Show,” 174.

¹¹⁰ Martin Durham, “The Conservative Party, the British Extreme Right and the Problem of Political Space, 1967–83,” in *The British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition*, ed. Mike Cronin (Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), 81–98.

¹¹¹ John Tyndall, “The Nation State: An Open Letter to Enoch Powell,” *Spearhead*, no. 68, September 1973, 10–11.

¹¹² “Powell Attacks National Front,” *Britain First*, no. 32, September 1975, 3.

¹¹³ Mark Pitchford, *The Conservative Party and the Extreme Right, 1945–1975* (Manchester, 2011), 7.

resources on weeding out perceived “extremists” and ensuring the marginalization—if only in electoral terms—of British fascism.

Taking these shortcomings into account, Black constructions of fascism remain especially useful in focusing on the more tangible manifestations of what A. Sivanandan called “the organic connection” between racism and fascism. For Sivanandan, a “fellow traveller of the Black Power movement” and the director of the Institute for Race Relations from 1973, the concept of fascism retained its analytical utility in thinking about race and capitalism in Britain.¹¹⁴ From early in his directorship, Sivanandan employed an expansive concept of fascism in his analysis of the development of an increasingly authoritarian capitalism in Britain as the economy struggled to adjust to post-imperial conditions.¹¹⁵ In particular, he insisted on the close and mutually sustaining relationship between anti-migrant state policy and popular anti-migrant sentiment and violence.¹¹⁶ Sivanandan was also a critic of the ANL in the late 1970s, bemoaning the broader Left’s failure to theorize about fascism in its contemporary context instead of “just extrapolating from the ‘30’s situation.”¹¹⁷ He went on to be part of a group of activists who broke with the anti-fascist journal *Searchlight* in 1991 over what they claimed was its tendency “to situate fascism historically, ideologically linked to anti-Semitism and the holocaust, and take up the refrain of ‘Never Again’.” He restated the need to “see [fascism] in a contemporary perspective” and to appreciate “that there is an organic link between racism and fascism” in order to “fight it correctly.”¹¹⁸

The arguments of Sivanandan and a long line of Black political thinkers in Britain offer a way of navigating between the two dominant and obstructive tendencies when it comes to thinking about the place of racism and fascism in British history. Anti-fascist groups like the ANL and subsequent historians specializing in the history of British fascism prioritized fascist organizations to the exclusion of the broader politics of race. Meanwhile, Hall and subsequent historians of race in modern Britain accorded fascism a “walk-on’ part” only. Black constructions of fascism redirect our attention to those moments and places where “everyday” institutionalized or structural racism aligned, overlapped, or more actively collaborated with the “extremist” racism of Britain’s organized white supremacist movement. As Padmore wrote, “[h]abits once formed are difficult to get rid of.”¹¹⁹

The historiographical question of the relationship between racism and fascism in Britain remains both unresolved and, in light of the present situation, burdened with ever-weightier implications. The Black constructions of fascism explored here enable us to move past the reductive question of whether to place an emphasis on the institutionalized racism of the state or the extra-parliamentary racism of the fascist movement. Instead, we should keep our eye on the substantive relationship between the two, whether focusing on settler-colonials flirting with fascism in the 1930s, the unofficial alliance between opponents of Commonwealth immigration within and beyond Parliament in the 1950s and 1960s, or the NF-sympathizing judges, teachers, and prison officers in the 1970s. The issue of the racist roots of fascism thus moves out of the world of metaphor or loose affinities or even similarities at the level of discourse and into one of very real points of connection.

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¹¹⁴ Wild, “Black Was the Colour of Our Fight”, 15.

¹¹⁵ “Editorial,” *Race & Class* 16, no. 3 (1975): 231–32; “Editorial,” *Race & Class* 18, no. 1 (1976): 1–2.

¹¹⁶ A. Sivanandan, “From Immigration Control to ‘Induced Repatriation,’” *Race & Class* 20, no. 1 (1978): 75–82, at 81–82; A. Sivanandan, “Challenging Racism: Strategies for the ‘80s,” *Race & Class* 25, no. 2 (1983): 1–11, at 6.

¹¹⁷ John Sturrock, “Anti-Fascists: Don’t Ignore Racism,” in *A Close Look at Fascism and Racism in Britain* (Big Flame, n.d.), 3–5, at 4.

¹¹⁸ “CARF is Back,” *CARF: Campaign Against Racism and Fascism*, no. 1, February–March 1991, 2.

¹¹⁹ Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa*, 3–4.

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