

Ambiguity and Imprint

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AMBIGUITY AND IMPRINT

British Racial Logics, Colonial Commissions of Enquiry, and the Creolization of Britain in the 1930s and 1940s

by Leslie James and Daniel Whittall

In a memorandum from the Annual General Meeting of the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP) in 1937, W. Arthur Lewis argued that “the exploitation of coloured people was possible in England only because it was possible in the colonies.” Lewis’s insight, that metropolitan and colonial racial discrimination intersected and overlapped, has recently become the focus of academic inquiries into the history of racism and anti-racism in Britain. His further recommendation to the League, that they “watch very closely events abroad,” might just as much be an injunction for contemporary historians of Britain as for an inter-war anti-racist group. Lewis was attentive to the requirement of contesting the way in which colonial racial prejudice filtered into its metropolitan equivalent, emphasizing that the ultimate task was “the destruction of colour prejudice in this country” (“Memorandum”).

What constituted the experience of race, or “color prejudice” as was more commonly referenced at the time, in imperial Britain? The problem, for Lewis and others concerned with countering racism in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, was that color prejudice in Britain did not carry a sign. “In America,” Jamaican-born journalist Una Marson declared, “they tell you frankly where you are and are not wanted by means of big signs, and they don’t try to hide their feelings. But in England, though they never say what they feel about us, you come up against incidents which hurt so much that you cannot talk about them” (qtd. in Bressey 32). As British sociologist Kenneth Little described in 1943, racism was experienced as “the refusal of lodgings, refusal of service in cafés, refusal of admittance to dance halls, etc., shrugs, nods, whispers, comments, etc., in public, in the street, in trams and in buses” (qtd. in Fryer 356). Not only were British race relations filtered through colonial events, they were further disassembled through subtly coded language and silences, action and inaction. Indeed, the very need to convey British racial prejudice in comparison with American forms of racialism is testament to its amorphous character.¹

If British racial dynamics could be evasive, they were also not static. In 1955, after spending almost two years in the imperial metropolis between 1947 and 1948, the American sociologist St. Clair Drake concluded that “Contact between white and coloured people in Britain” was in the midst of an extended process of redefinition: from a social condition to a “social problem.” During his research Drake developed close connections with individuals associated with the LCP, the International African Service Bureau (IASB), and various organizations and committees in the seaport towns of Liverpool and Cardiff, where “welfare” activity on the “color problem” tended to be focused.² His research concluded that over the past thirty-five years, a web of associations, committees, and institutions

had coalesced into what he termed a “race relations action-structure” (Drake 197–98). Kevin Gaines has recently shown that Drake “argued for the existence of systemic racism in Britain,” and that his research findings “ran counter to the Colonial Office’s ongoing denial of the existence of the colour bar operating in the United Kingdom” (Gaines 82). Drake’s research and conclusions were part of a burgeoning field of race relations theory after the 1950s. Yet while the origins of this discourse borrowed heavily from US race relations theory, as Barbara Bush has argued, its origins in Britain were “rooted in an imperial context” (246).

Writing the transnational history of imperial race-making, then, requires careful attention to immediate contexts in order to avoid a view of race in static, decontextualized terms (Kramer 199). This is because racisms invoke hard and essentialized categories but, as Ann Laura Stoler has argued, simultaneously derive their strength from “the internal malleability assigned to the changing features of racial essence” (*Carnal Knowledge* 144). Race, in other words, aims to imprint fixed essences by applying ambiguous and changeable identifiers. The uneasy space which British race relations occupied in the first half of the twentieth century contained a number of interlocking variables. On the one hand, Susan Pennybacker has shown that it was not just in geographic terms but also in the codes of racial practice and anti-racist politics in the era of fascism that “London sat uncomfortably poised between Jim Crow and the Third Reich” (5). But the joints of racial politics between Europe, Britain, and the United States also included the colonies, a point Pennybacker herself is sensitive to. Importantly, the transition of British race relations into a “social problem” from 1920 to the 1950s also occurred in the realm of colonial policy. The literature on the interwar British Empire has long pointed to the importance of the 1930s as a transition towards a mode of colonial governance centered around the dual rhetoric of “welfare” and “development” for the colonies. Such reforms were instigated by what Frederick Cooper has called the “shock from below” provided by the outbursts of striking and rioting in Africa and the Caribbean which, in Cooper’s terms, “jarred [British officials] from their complacency” and became manifest largely through the reports of colonial commissions of enquiry (most famously the West India Royal Commission in 1938) (57, 58).

The dynamics of racialized identities in Britain were themselves in a state of profound flux in the interwar years. As Laura Tabili has argued, new legislation passed in the interwar era sought to frame specific communities in Britain, primarily groups of working class seafarers, as racially different through the passing of the 1925 Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order. At least since the 1905 Aliens Act, the British State had legitimated “a more vigilant policing of the frontiers between the ‘us’ who composed the nation and the ‘them’ whose fortunes were destined to remain outside” (Schwarz, *White Man’s World* 150). Subjects from British colonies were, nominally at least, considered part of Greater Britain, provided they were content to remain beyond metropolitan borders. However, as Bill Schwarz argues, the early years of the twentieth century saw the British State engaged in a process of “imposing stricter, centralised authority on the ‘less developed’ darker races,” refining its control over State borders in a manner that was central to the “undifferentiated project of creating the imperial nation.” Schwarz sees in this process of the racialized redefinition of State borders the return of racially coded mindsets and colonial mentalities to Britain. Yet he recognizes, simultaneously, that the process of “England learning from its frontier societies how to become a properly white man’s country” comprised only part of the story (*White Man’s World* 159).

The imperial dimension was not only important to the British State's efforts to define and manage its citizenry. It mattered equally as much to colonial subjects themselves. As Anne Spry Rush has argued, many colonial subjects, particularly amongst the middle classes and those from the Caribbean especially, identified closely with Britain as the "Mother Country." Through their articulations of a British identity at once close to the codes of British life, and simultaneously at one point removed from them due to their colonial origins, some subjects in colonies like the Caribbean articulated an identity that Rush terms "imperial Britishness." Some African diasporic migrants came to Britain closely identifying with Britishness, presuming that the "Mother Country" would have their best interests at heart. Nor was this an experience specific to Caribbean migrants; Philip Zachernuk has argued that middle class Nigerians and others from West Africa, too, "went to Britain to acquire the training and culture that would mark them as heirs of Britain's 'civilizing mission' in Africa" (95).

Our focus in this paper is on how the politics of empire shaped the experience of diaspora and of race in Britain. We examine how non-white colonial subjects themselves activated matters of race and imperial politics at the heart of metropolitan Britain through their engagement with the investigative, bureaucratic modes of imperial governance. These modes of governance and welfare provision, as Jordana Bailkin has argued for the postwar period, were not simply about rule in the colonies, but saw the coming together of the colonial outside and metropolitan interior that was essential to British race relations. And as Barbara Bush has argued for earlier decades, liberal race discourse "[f]rom its inception" included "problematic assumptions about race, culture and equality, and evaded the root causes of racism" (246). Yet if scholars have recognized the imperial dimension of British race relations and acknowledged that these often evaded racism's root structure, we argue that one way of better understanding this puzzle is to look to the practice of commissions of enquiry as a means for interpreting British racial dynamics.

One of the defining features of race relations in Britain emanates directly from a crucial juxtaposition unique to Britain's imperial mentality: the metropolitan "color problem" and the colonial commission of enquiry. The British "color problem" was so pernicious precisely because it did not manifest overt and definable racial prejudice. It was the sly underbelly, the wolf in sheep's clothing, which did not conform to the identifiable racial politics of "black" and "white" in the United States that could be named and resisted. But what existed beside this opacity was the regular practice of issuing commissions of enquiry into colonial matters. These were public, precise, and declaratively positive actions to deal with any "problems" that people of color faced in the British Empire. The contrast between these specific investigations and the abstruse discrimination that pervaded British social life created several challenges for Africans and people of African descent in Britain. But the reports from these commissions, and indeed the very process of enquiry, also created opportunities for the discussion of racial matters in the United Kingdom which may not otherwise have been open. The combination of experiencing the subtleties of racial prejudice in Britain, coupled with the experience of seeing the British State's efforts to resolve colonial labor disputes through the pursuit of commissions of enquiry, enabled a refining and, in some instances, a challenging of the sense of imperial Britishness; brought colonial matters into the heart of metropolitan political debate; and created opportunities for black activists to confront the racial codes at the heart of Britishness as

well as the British State's bureaucratic apparatuses. The introduction of colonial pressures into metropolitan discussion through these commissions, we argue, was a crucial element in the creolization of Britain.

The Creolization of Britain

One way into the racialized dynamics of social life in inter-war Britain is to consider British society itself as undergoing a long-running process of creolization, the contours of which have only so far been sketched in the wider literature. Bill Schwarz has drawn attention to the fact that the British Empire facilitated the transmission of "the cultural forms of the periphery . . . to . . . the centre" in a mutually transformative process that has, Schwarz suggests, been "occurring as long as colonialism." In the process, Schwarz identifies such cultural transmissions as being at the heart of "the gradual, uneven creolization of the metropolis" (*West Indian* 268).

Deploying the concept of creolization in this way, however, requires care. Recent years have seen an explosion of works on creolization, and much of this deploys the term as a metaphor for understanding the cultural forms supposedly initiated through modern processes of globalization. As Charles Stewart writes, the concept of creolization can sometimes seem "to have flattened out into an expressive buzzword used in concatenation with 'syncretism,' 'hybridity,' or 'mixture.'" In this way, creolization becomes "more of an epigrammatic than an analytic concept" (Stewart 6). The concept of creolization originally emerged from the lived historical experiences of the peoples of the Caribbean. The coming-together of diverse cultures and traditions—brought into collision with one another through historical processes of enslavement, conquest, and commerce in what George Lamming has called "a violent rhythm of race and religion"—led to the formation of hybrid, creolized cultural and social forms (17). Metaphorical usages of the term thus run the risk of both undermining the historic rooting of creolization in the violence of colonization and enslavement, and also neglecting the historically oppositional roots of the idea of the creole. As Mimi Sheller suggests, it is imperative to foreground "the concrete histories of Caribbean theorizations of creolization" if one is to avoid abstracting a radical and potentially oppositional analytical terminology and flattening it into a meaningless signifier for diversity (286).

In this paper, we seek to develop these Caribbean roots of the theory of creolization by extending the insights of Kamau Brathwaite, amongst the earliest and most important Caribbean thinkers to explicitly foreground and theoretically develop the concept of creolization, into an analysis of the racialized dynamics of metropolitan society. For Brathwaite, creolization was "the single most important factor in the development of Jamaican society" between 1770 and 1820. He defined creolization as "a cultural action—material, psychological, and spiritual—based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and—as white/black, culturally discrete groups—to each other" (296). Brathwaite emphasizes that the process of creolization for newly arrived African slaves was initiated under a structure of violence whereby "the slave would learn the rudiments of his new language and be initiated into the work routines that awaited

him." Yet it was not just the enslaved that underwent creolization. As Brathwaite puts it, "it was a two-way process."

It is this sense of creolization as a two-way process that we are mobilizing here. Interwar Britain was one more "contact zone" in which the encounter between colonized and colonizer, re-structured in the metropolis but nevertheless imbued with racialized categories of thought as well as the everyday violence of colonial domination, produced cultural transformations understandable within the framework of creolization. Indeed, in his focus on Caribbean societies, Brathwaite described creolization as "the result of a complex situation where a colonial polity reacts, as a whole, to external metropolitan pressures, and at the same time to internal adjustments made necessary by the juxtaposition of master and slave, elite and labourer, in a culturally heterogeneous relationship" (xvi). Figuring Britain in the 1930s and 1940s as a social formation in which racialized identities structured through colonial relations were being reshaped and recast by the movement of colonial peoples, as well as the transmission of ideas and events from the colonies into the metropolis, enables us to re-frame Brathwaite's suggested structuring of the creolization process. In this sense, the creolization of Britain might productively be taken to be *the result of a complex situation where a metropolitan polity reacts, as a whole, to internal and external colonial pressures*. Such an approach builds upon Michaeline Crichlow's recent call for scholars to develop ways in which they might "displace the notion of creolization outside its original setting" whilst simultaneously holding onto "the *idea* of creolization's *rhizomic rootings* in the Caribbean" (ix).

Crichlow's approach involves thinking the construction of the Caribbean relationally, displacing the impositions of geographical location and replacing it with an attentiveness to "articulations of spaces and peoples, whose places of enunciation and sociocultural practices have been sited within a global frame" (ix-x). It thus corresponds to David Lambert's interpretation of creolization as "a spatially articulated process of transculturation that occurred through material and discursive networks linking Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe" (406). For the purposes of this paper, we interpret labor unrest across the British Empire as having exerted an external colonial pressure on British society. The initiation of colonial commissions of enquiry, and the opportunities these opened for colonial subjects to engage with matters of race and empire within Britain itself, correspondingly transformed episodes of colonial unrest into internal colonial pressures operating at the heart of the imperial metropolis.

Colonial Commissions of Enquiry and the Politics of Empire

This responsive process, of metropolitan creolization as that which results from forces within and without, comes into relief precisely through the administrative practice of commissions of enquiry. Anxiety over "imperial contagion"—a fear that despotism in the colonies would infect metropolitan politics—was most famously evident in the concerns of Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, and John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth. Both Burke and Mill articulated their apprehensions within the context of enquiries into colonial rebellions in India and Jamaica respectively. More widely, Zoe Laidlaw has concluded

that the parliamentary debates which accompanied nineteenth-century enquiries into matters in the colonies demonstrated a clear impression among government ministers that the welfare of Britain was intimately connected with its actions in the colonies (754). This perceived connection between colonial stability and metropolitan welfare surfaced also in the twentieth century. Disturbances on Trinidad's oilfields in 1937, with their implications for British rearmament against German and Italian aggression, were foremost in the mind of Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore when the Forster Commission set out (Johnson 257).

Commissions of enquiry could take several forms and could be established at a number of levels within government. Between 1800 and 1950, Britain authorized over thirty Royal Commissions concerned with the management of colonial territories (excluding Scotland and Ireland). Royal Commissions to examine disturbances and economic depression in the West Indies set sail in 1865, 1882, 1893, and 1896. By the time of the Moyne Commission to the West Indies in the 1930s, it had become an accepted convention within the Colonial Office that a commission of enquiry be established after any "disturbance in a Colony" (Johnson 257, fn5).

But while Royal Commissions represented the highest level of importance, usually accompanied by a slightly broader mandate, formal and informal enquiries represented a major tool of colonial governance. Commissions of enquiry are now recognized, in African studies in particular, as an important mode of "lawfare" in the colonization process (Comaroff 306). Performed through what Bernard Cohn has termed "investigative modalities," commissions also became a crucial medium for ordering the civilizing mission (5). The surveys, statistical reports, encyclopedias, histories, gazettes, and legal codes that often accompanied these commissions, but also emerged independent of formal government commissions, substantiated what was relevant knowledge and directed policy procedures. These investigative modalities, as Ronen Shamir and Daphna Hacker have argued, were intimately tied to the civilizing mission because they "created the framework for asserting an enlightened form of governance, based on defining, classifying, and registering space; recording transactions and tracing the circulation of property and goods; counting and classifying populations through the registrar of birth, marriage, and death; and licensing some activities as legitimate and suppressing others as immoral or unlawful" (436).

The relentless production of data was endemic to the process itself. Formal commissions of enquiry were almost always ordered for the purpose of suggesting new regulations and practical improvements to government and administration. The aims and instructions of commissions to colonial territory across the nineteenth and early-twentieth century consistently stressed the need for "practical advice" to problems. The applied nature of these enquiries fits them into a formulaic, reform-oriented terrain that stressed administrative order.

The production of reports, statistics, surveys, and legal codes later emerged with greater force in Britain itself after the First World War. In the 1920s and early 1930s, these centered upon the colored population in British seaports, as well as in the shifting and veiled rules laid down in the Coloured Alien Seamen Order. In the early 1930s a number of different welfare bodies and philanthropic organizations, in conjunction with university academics, conducted survey research into "half-caste" children in seaports and the social conditions in these port towns. In 1936, the first major lobby went to the Home Office to

argue for government intervention into the “problem” of colored seamen and “half-caste” children. In consultation with the Colonial Office, the Home Office then held a conference and instituted a series of local enquiries in four or five ports. As will be discussed below, more formalized government enquiries into the “color problem” did emerge in Britain in the early 1940s. However the Colonial Office also tended to adopt a more laissez-faire approach to studies of colonial people in Britain, allowing scholars and independent organizations to conduct most of the research.

While the mundane nature of these investigations and reports stressed procedure, they never functioned solely on this plane. In his broad study of British Royal Commissions across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Matthew Keller has identified three specific groups and institutional contexts which Royal Commissions (in Britain and its colonies) focused upon: prisons and prisoners, laborers and the “working class,” and colonial conflicts that contained racial tension. By studying commissions across these three groups, Keller isolates more long-lasting patterns that confirm the notion that commissions functioned on both a highly specific and a more complex epistemological plane. Keller shows that the latter two subjects of commission investigation were successfully channeled into “cycles of bureaucratization” that moved from particularistic strategies to more generalized management. But unlike commissions that dealt with labor or prison conflicts, colonial commissions did not result in the same standardization of governance that worked to stabilize conflict. Instead, the reports demonstrated “vast explanatory inconsistencies that [were] rarely systematically addressed, much less resolved.” Recommendations “wavered between centralization and decentralization” and causal frameworks varied “from the general to the particular—sometimes within the same report” (227).

The inconsistencies within colonial commissions which Keller identifies support the idea that colonies were understood—and often governed—by European empires as spaces of exception.³ Commissions embodied the imperial axiom that the colonies were unique and specific spaces where different laws and principles applied, while at the same time being understood within a broad stroke of civilized and uncivilized; where races of people who practiced various religions, languages, and ways of life could be categorized according to generalized characteristics.

And it is these dynamics—of the generalized and the specific as well as centralized and decentralized structures—that are so crucial to commissions as a site where British racial dynamics played out. Keller notes that many of the Royal Commissions sent to colonial territories acknowledged that the conflict the commissions investigated contained a fundamental element of racial tension. The Commissioner sent to Lower Canada in 1839 conceded that upon his arrival, “I found not a struggle of principles, but of races” (qtd. in Keller 221).⁴ Yet the results and recommendations rarely bore this out. Indeed, from the perspective of those in the colonies, the stream of reports and commissions usually resulted in very little overall. As one literary magazine concluded in 1941, the West India Royal (Moyne) Commission into unrest in the Caribbean “has joined its predecessors on the file now and will lie there on the top until the years cover it with another” (Cahill 12).

One of the main reasons that critiques of these commissions rarely bore substantial results was that these enquiries were frequently undertaken as an end in themselves. In her study of the Commissions of Eastern Enquiry between 1818 and 1826, Laidlaw concludes that these commissions “signaled the aspiration to reform *and* its realisation” (757). Laid-

law's research demonstrates how humanitarian actors both in England and in the colonies attempted to capitalize on the authority and power of imperial enquiries for their own ends. Conversely, we aim to show how the commissions of the 1930s and 1940s engaged people in Britain and in the West Indies, modulating racial dynamics in the metropole by bringing the colonies home. Howard Johnson has argued that the commissions sent to various West Indian colonies in the late 1930s, including the Moyne Commission, were conducted in order to introduce "defensive reforms" that were already desired in London. They also aimed to validate commissions as neutral intermediaries that were objective, impartial, and constructive modes of imperial governance.

If the orderly, specific nature of the commissions validated colonial rule, these characteristics also had important implications for British racial logics. Because the primary intention of commissions was to investigate specific problems and collect information, they sent the message that reform should be based on local evidence rather than universal principles (Laidlaw 757). The process of imprinting knowledge, collating social practices, and gathering economic data diverted the racial ideology that lay at the heart of colonial practice into procedural norms which claimed a purely functional capacity. Both the emphasis on local evidence rather than universal principles, and the pretense of reform and progress, combined to mute more fundamental criticisms about the imperial system.

This is the first side of the Janus-faced British race relations we are discussing here. Yet if commissions functioned as an ideological state apparatus that could affirm colonial policy and deflect critical thought about the principles that guided imperial rule, they also ultimately operated as a crucial mode through which British racial dynamics were experienced. Some of the best scholarship on commissions treat them as a bureaucratic apparatus that helped maintain colonial control and enabled the management of the empire, but this work focuses almost entirely on the colonial context. Ann Laura Stoler's recent work, on the cross-referencing of Dutch social categories with its colonies in the East Indies can provide some useful tools, since for Stoler commissions functioned as one of the "unsure and hesitant sorts of documentation" through which Dutch imperial social categories were produced (Stoler, *Along* 1). This article moves further by foregrounding British documents of colonial enquiry as central elements of metropolitan political debate, indeed of the very gradual creolization of that metropolis, made so largely because of the work of colonial subjects and their supporters in the various metropolitan political circles they moved in. Through the conscious efforts of these groups, commissions of enquiry became a crucial means of drawing together the multiple experiences of Africans and people of African descent, living in various stages of diaspora under the British system.

**Colonial Commissions Come Home:
Commissions of Enquiry and Black Activists in Britain**

The appointment of the West India Royal Commission in 1938 was not only the culmination of a series of commissions established to enquire into unrest in the Caribbean, it was also instigated at the end of a decade in which black activists actively asserted the relevance of colonial matters to a metropolitan audience. For example, solidarity with the

Scottsboro Boys case in the United States, revulsion at the League of Nations complicity in the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and concerted opposition to rumors that appeasement of Hitler could be achieved by returning former German territory in Africa, all heightened and politicized the responses of colonial subjects in Britain to questions of race and empire.⁵ All of these episodes did not result in a flattened or homogenous unity but, rather, a site of critical and lively debate between black activists of various ideological leanings who contested the problems and solutions to these issues amongst themselves as well as with white members of British political parties and philanthropic interest groups. Indeed, the 1930s proved a particularly fertile ground for dialogue and cooperation between black-led organizations of varying political stripes, especially: the West African Students' Union (founded in 1925 by the Nigerian Ladipo Solanke and J. B. Danquah from the Gold Coast), which provided a key meeting point for tackling issues faced by black students and intellectuals in Britain; the League of Coloured Peoples (founded in 1931 by the Jamaican-born Harold Moody), which organized around the social and economic conditions of black people living in Britain and, while critical of elements of imperial rule, tended to take a more moderate line on calls for independence; the International African Service Bureau (formed in 1937 by a group of self-identified "radicals" including George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Jomo Kenyatta, I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, and Chris (Jones) Braithwaite); and the broadly communist-aligned Negro Welfare Association (formed in 1931 under the leadership of Arnold Ward).⁶ The galvanizing force of this activity—especially for tying colonial issues to British racial politics—was crucial. Within the context of these episodes and groups, the commissions of the 1930s afforded a unique opportunity for colonial subjects and their supporters in Britain to make their voices heard more loudly since the commissions suggested the possibility of engaging in direct dialogue with representatives of the British imperial State. Both in the press and in the corridors of power that were the meeting-rooms and committee halls where colonial commissioners took evidence, these enquiries became a vital space where the colonies and the metropole came together. In order to bring the dual dynamics of creolization in Britain more squarely into light, this final section examines how in the late 1930s and early 1940s commissions on welfare primarily in the Caribbean, but also in Africa and in Britain, served as an operative medium where British racial logics played out.

By the mid-1930s the economic viability of most British West Indian colonies had become a matter of serious concern. In 1929–1930 the Colonial Office authorized a Royal Commission, headed by Lord Sydney Olivier, to inquire into the causes of the sustained downturn in the sugar industry. The Olivier Commission's report, as Selwyn Cudjoe has argued, reiterated observations made by the West Indies Royal Commission of 1897 about the dire conditions of the laboring population, and the British government's responsibility to these workers (121). Taking up the "welfare" component of the evolving interwar colonial policy, a further commission was sent to the West Indies in 1931–1932 to investigate educational needs in the West Indies. Neither of these commissions nor their recommendations, however, stalled unrest in the colonies. In January 1935, riots broke out in St. Kitts, followed in February by a strike and protest march in Trinidad. In September 1935, sugar workers in British Guiana went on strike, while a riot occurred in St. Vincent over increased taxes in October. In November, workers also went on strike in St. Lucia. In 1936, there was relative calm, but by 1937 strikes and riots erupted in Trinidad, Barbados,

British Guiana, and St. Lucia. To address these, the Colonial Office dispatched the Forster Commission to Trinidad and the Dean Commission to Barbados.

For black colonial subjects in Britain, especially those in organizations where Caribbean members were most prominent, commissions into the unrest in the Caribbean were of great importance.⁷ The LCP, for example, had long attended to Caribbean events. However, in late 1937, writing specifically of events in Trinidad, the Barbadian Hugh Springer wrote that these disturbances ought to be understood as “a genuine reaction to oppressive living and labour conditions,” and noted that any attempt to put “blame on ‘agitators’” would be to “shrink criminally and perilously from the real situation.” In this context, he wrote that the League was aware of the establishment of commissions of enquiry into matters, and that they “await with anxiety their findings and practical results” (Springer 46).

The League, though, did not wait impassively for the results of the commissions to come to light. Instead, they took the opportunity presented by such commissions to make their own contributions to the debate over the nature of Caribbean politics, economics, and society, doing so in some instances by establishing links with political figures from the Caribbean who travelled to the metropolis to give evidence before the commissions of enquiry. Grantley Adams, a member of the Barbadian legislature and founder in 1938 of the Barbados Progressive League, had travelled to Britain at the end of 1937 to lobby the Colonial Office. While in Britain, the LCP hosted a public meeting in the Memorial Hall at which Adams was the main speaker. Adams’s talk was wide-ranging, covering a variety of West Indian colonies. The full report of Adams’s speech, printed in the LCP’s organ, *The Keys*, reads as a damning indictment of British colonial policy in the West Indies, and in particular of the “dangerous reaction to the expression of discontent” displayed by the imperial government. Adams closed by stressing that “both the loyalty and the well-being of the West Indies were worth preserving,” and called for a “forward looking policy on the part of the Colonial Office” rather than complete independence. Yet in doing so, he drew specific attention to the potential role of the commissions of enquiry, and made explicit comment on the direction that he hoped future enquiries would take. “Notwithstanding the usual fate of the reports of Commissions,” said Adams, “this was an unparalleled opportunity of instituting a strong commission, including an Under-Secretary at least, together with representatives of both Houses of Parliament and of the Labour movement in England . . . to visit *all* the islands” in the Caribbean, and to report on the shared dynamics of unrest across the region” (Adams, “Labour Disturbances” 66).

Nor were the LCP the only black activists to make contact with Adams during his time in Britain. Adams’s biographer has noted that George Padmore introduced him both to members of the IASB, and to white British leftists such as Denis Pritt, Stafford Cripps, and Arthur Creech Jones (Hoyos 67–72). An article in the *New Leader* also reported that Padmore took Adams to meet the leading figures in the Independent Labour Party at their headquarters (“War and Fascism” 3). These connections between colonial activists and the metropolitan left were facilitated precisely by the existence of commissions of enquiry into events in the Caribbean.

In 1938, the Forster Commission published its report into the causes of the unrest in Trinidad. On March 4, 1938, a protest meeting criticizing the Forster Commission was held at Conway Hall in London, under the auspices of the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) and the LCP (Clark; Moores). The NCCL’s illustrious membership included the

authors H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, *New Statesman* editor Kingsley Martin, and Labor politician Aneurin Bevan, among others; the meeting was addressed by Labor MP Arthur Creech Jones, St. Lucian economics student and future Nobel laureate W. Arthur Lewis, and chaired by LCP President Harold Moody. Writing in *The Keys* after the meeting, Lewis criticized the Forster Report's effort to mask the profitability of Trinidadian oil firms. Quoting figures at length, he demonstrated that the Commission's findings were based on false estimates of oil company profits, suggesting that the Commission had "thus set itself up to champion oil interests even at the cost of inaccuracy," and arguing that as such "the Commission could not but produce a report in the main useless to the cause of social progress in Trinidad." Echoing concerns articulated by both Grantley Adams and W. Arthur Lewis, the NCCL and the IASB issued a memorandum denouncing the Forster Report's "surprisingly intemperate language" that described labor leader Uriah Butler as a "fanatical Negro" and his followers as "hooligans." These expressions, the memorandum declared, were "calculated to arouse the maximum of prejudice" ("Commission Report"). The language of the report was hardly surprising given the general attitude to colonial peoples articulated in Parliament. As Stephen Howe points out, the House of Commons debate on the Forster Commission Report was the only full-scale discussion on the Caribbean revolts (where Independent Labor Party MP James Maxton did raise objection to the characterization of Uriah Butler) (Howe 100). Only a few months after the report was issued, Independent Labor Party MP John McGovern declared in the House of Commons that "I am very often angered by the idea—I heard it in a speech tonight—of the superiority of the white race, the superiority of a certain class of the white race" ("MP Denounces"). The debate about events in the Caribbean thus figured prominently in metropolitan dynamics of race.

Lewis also indicated that many of the Commission's recommendations were mere repeats of previous commissions, and he ultimately dismissed the findings as "essentially an employer's report which . . . brought great relief to the oil interests. But to those whose interest is social justice it brought only disappointment" ("Notes").⁸ Unsurprisingly, George Padmore went even further than Lewis in damning the Commission's report. Prior to its publication, Padmore had written a piece for the Independent Labor Party's monthly periodical *Controversy* in which he reviewed the history of the Trinidadian events, declaring that conditions had only gotten worse while the Commission was gathering information. The following month, Padmore used the same periodical to declare that the report itself was "one of the most disgraceful documents ever issued by a Royal Commission." Returning to the theme of the parallels between British colonial policy and fascism, Padmore wrote that "the Report would do credit to Mussolini. It is a most bloodthirsty document." Yet Padmore's faith in the West Indian working class shone through, reassuring readers that "the Trinidad workers will not stand for this for one moment" ("Outrageous Report").⁹

The emphasis which black activists in Britain placed upon the revolutionary spirit of colonial laborers bore the imprint of unacceptable working and living conditions not only in the West Indies, but also in other parts of the empire and at home. Importantly, the Trinidad and Barbados Commissions did not occur in isolation. In 1935, and again in 1938, commissions of enquiry were dispatched to examine recurring strikes and revolts in the copper mines of Northern Rhodesia. In 1938, a report into labor unrest in Mauritius's sugar industry was also released. Like the West Indies Commissions, those sent to Rhodesia

and Mauritius investigated labor unrest in economies that relied almost exclusively on the production of a single commodity—a point acknowledged separately in each report—and the officials appointed to investigate these disturbances were often the same individuals (“Trinidad Governor”). But the connection between these commissions was not merely a problem of the organization of colonial economies, or of colony-to-colony administrative swapping. All of these investigations served not only as context but as active ground for the process of creolization in Britain. In the summer of 1938, representatives from the LCP, the IASB, the Negro Welfare Association (NWA), and the Colonial Seamen’s Association formed a committee charged with drafting a memorandum to the Rhodesia Commission. The correspondence between these representatives shows that meetings for the Rhodesia committee often coincided with meetings to form a “Central Committee for the Welfare of Coloured Children in the UK.”¹⁰ The Rhodesia Commissions, the West Indies Commissions, and the welfare of colored people in Britain all constituted specific struggles and elicited discrete responses to precise bureaucratic enquiries. But, crucially, they were all entangled in the minds of black activists in the metropole.

Thus by the time a Royal Commission was formed in 1938 with a broad remit to investigate the unrest in the British West Indies, an active contingent of individuals and organizations existed that were ready and able to make this government enquiry a metropolitan site for the debate not only of colonial practices, but also of imperial attitudes. In their periodical *International African Opinion*, the IASB criticized the Commission’s very make-up, noting that W. Arthur Lewis’s recent appointment to the post of lecturer at the London School of Economics proved that there were black West Indians capable enough of sitting on the Commission (“Stop Press”). The LCP, too, was critical of the fact that most of the Commission members “qualify in no particular way for the investigation of labour troubles in the Caribbean,” and also denounced the absence of any remit for discussing political factors as contributory causes of the unrest (“Editorial”).

In an attempt to rectify this absence, the LCP and IASB united with the NWA to prepare a co-authored submission to the Moyne Commission. Their memorandum—a “remarkable instance of intellectual and political collaboration” given the disparate political positions of the members—highlighted the awful conditions across the West Indies, calling for wide-ranging social reforms including the establishment of a West Indian University, the building of hospitals, and a program of housing improvement and new house-building (Matera 93). Both the IASB and the LCP backed the idea that “[o]nly when economic improvement goes hand in hand with political freedom will the West Indies be freed from the stultification of all progress” (“Editorial”).

Initially, Lord Moyne had felt that it was unnecessary for his Commission to meet with representatives of the LCP, IASB or NWA.¹¹ However, after an intervention from Colonial Office staff suggesting that “we will be making the greatest possible mistake if we don’t hear evidence from this group” because “[i]t will be said that we have not cared to hear the evidence of negroes [sic], but only that given by whites,” this decision was reversed.¹² It was decided that Moody would speak on the aspects of the memorandum pertaining to education and health, Ras T. Makonnen of the IASB on agriculture, housing, and land settlement, and Peter Blackman of the NWA on politics and Trade Unions.¹³ In the end, only Moody and Blackman attended the meeting.¹⁴ Following the discussions with the Royal Commission representatives, Moody submitted two further memorandums before

the Commission departed for the West Indies, one dealing in more detail with the medical services, and the other with questions of land settlement and agriculture.¹⁵

Other black activists in Britain also took the opportunity to engage with the Commission independently. Una Marson, for example, returned to Britain from Jamaica and met with the Commission members on September 30. In her memorandum submitted in advance to the Commission, Marson focused particularly on social and educational issues, though she also concentrated on the importance of “cultural development.”¹⁶ W. Arthur Lewis, having just returned to Britain from a trip to the Caribbean which had included visits to Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbados, St. Vincent, Grenada, Trinidad, and British Guiana, also lobbied the Commission individually. His written submission, entitled “A memorandum on social welfare,” described the fundamental problem of West Indian society as being the low prices received for agricultural products, particularly sugar, and thus insisted that the fundamental question for the Commission to address was “what sacrifice is the British consumer willing to make in the interest of the West Indian peasant?” (Lewis 27).¹⁷

When the Moyne Commission finally produced its report in 1939, it was deemed so damning that the government refused to release it for fear of how it might be used as Nazi propaganda against the Empire. Instead, they published a short document outlining the recommendations made by the Royal Commission. Unsurprisingly, the two activists who had so far been most active over events in their homeland both penned responses. After acknowledging the significant funds allocated for social work, W. Arthur Lewis rounded on the report, saying that it was better at grasping short term problems than long term solutions, and bemoaning its failure to take a lead on the question of constitutional reform. Lewis also requested that the government release the entire commission report, expressing disappointment at having “this meagre document fobbed off on us, after all the work that members of the public both in England and the West Indies have put into making the Commission’s investigations successful” (“West India”). Padmore, writing at length in *The Crisis*, the US-based organ of the NAACP, made similar points, noting that the government’s failure to release the full commission report was “the gravest indictment of its imperialist misrule” and noting that the time was now ripe for the West Indies to be given “full self-determination” (“England’s West Indian Slums” 317).

Of course, not all black activists in Britain would have agreed with Padmore’s call for immediate full self-determination. There were many in the LCP, not least Harold Moody, who, in Anne Spry Rush’s words, were “open to making accommodations with British officials” (73). Such were the “competing logics on which race . . . and the politics of empire in Britain turned” around complex attitudes and approaches to Britishness and empire that were in constant negotiation (Whittall, “In This Metropolis” 95). Yet what is clear is that, regardless of the particular perspective taken, the emergence of colonial commissions of enquiry became an important focal point for articulations of what it meant to be black and colonial in Britain.

That this is the case can be seen most clearly in the way that black activists in Britain followed up on the suggestions developed in the Moyne Commission and in later colonial welfare and development policies in the 1940s, and the manner in which they translated the significance of these episodes for the metropolis. In June 1941, for example, the LCP wrote critically of the failure by government to follow-up sufficiently on their promised investments in improving British Caribbean colonies, arguing that if Britain truly did

mean to be trustees of its colonies, then “expenditure on health, housing, and education cannot wait until after the war.”¹⁸

Then, in August of 1941, W. Arthur Lewis published a special issue of the LCP’s *News Letter* with extensive letters between Moody and the Colonial Office on the question of the opportunities available to non-white colonial subjects to work in the colonial service itself, as colonial secretaries and even governors. In his introduction, Lewis charged that the colonial service was “for all practical purposes . . . reserved to white men, to the exclusion of those born within the colonial empire itself.”¹⁹ Lewis reminded readers of recent attempts by the British government to affirm that “the British Empire stands for racial equality,” and as such the LCP decided the time might be right to engage with the Colonial Office on its own racialized employment practices. The LCP objected in particular to the use of the phrase “of European parentage” in the conditions of employment for colonial service employees. In response, Colonial Office officials pointed out that certain non-European and non-white officials had been appointed in particular colonies. Moody, however, pointed out that despite these appointments in the colonies themselves, “what we are concerned with are appointments made in London by the Colonial Office.” Several of the terms used in advertisements for the colonial services, he added, “would be more in place in a German document than in a British one.” In his concluding summary of the correspondence, Lewis wrote that “We are accustomed to some hypocrisy in official circles, but this correspondence, we submit, is a masterpiece.” He went on to indicate that, as far as the LCP was concerned, the substantive issues at the heart of their correspondence remained unaddressed. “In the British Empire,” wrote Lewis, “there can be no Negro Governor because the maintenance of white prestige is considered to be an essential pillar of the imperial regime” (“Conclusion” 119).²⁰

For the LCP and other black activists in Britain, the use of racialized language to describe colonial subjects and to inflict prejudice against them were central matters of metropolitan political debate. As such, they pursued politicians such as Prime Minister Winston Churchill relentlessly if, as with Churchill’s Mansion House speech of 1942, they detected racialized condescension directed towards colonial people (“Prime Minister’s”). By the early 1940s, the LCP in particular had corresponded and lobbied at length with the Colonial Office, not only about colonial matters but also about racial prejudice in Britain itself, with a particular focus on the establishment of Aggrey House, a hostel for African and Caribbean subjects in Britain established with direct Colonial Office support.²¹ As a result of such engagement, when the Colonial Office established an Advisory Committee on the Welfare of Colonial Peoples in the United Kingdom, they requested that Moody join them.²² In addition to founding the LCP in 1931, Moody also served on two predominantly white but nominally multi-racial organizations set up to attend to the “cause” of the “color problem” in Great Britain: the Joint Council to Promote Understanding between White and Coloured People, and the London Group on African Affairs (Bush 232–233).

Of course, as should be clear by now questions of race and empire did not require a specific committee focused on the welfare of colonial people in the UK in order to come to the forefront for black activists in Britain. Indeed, they had been central to how these activists negotiated their positions as non-white colonial subjects in a racialized imperial metropolis in the 1930s and 1940s. But this Advisory Committee represented the Colonial Office’s more direct engagement with the issues faced by black Britons. Importantly,

despite Moody's hopes, this investigative unit manifested the same characteristics (and personnel) as previous enquiries.

The Advisory Committee's Chairman, J. L. Keith, was well-known to black activists in Britain for his involvement in the controversial opening of Aggrey House, an initiative which Moody supported but which other organizations (including WASU and those in the IASB and NWA) questioned because it was set up with funds from colonial governments, philanthropic organizations, and commercial firms with interest in the colonies. Keith was also a former employee of the British South Africa Company in Northern Rhodesia and had been actively involved in Lord Hailey's *Africa Survey*. Despite the Advisory Committee's remit to tackle the welfare of racialized colonial people in Britain, it explicitly refused to take up the issue of race. After sociologist Kenneth Little, who was then completing his major study, *Negroes in Britain*, urged the Committee to take "a more imaginative and even more constructive attitude towards the implications which arise simply out of the question of 'colour,'" Chairman Keith noted that this was "a welfare, not a political committee." Echoing the restrictive tendencies of previous commissions, Keith concluded that while the "colour bar question" would inevitably arise, the Advisory Committee should be "headed off from concerning itself with it beyond what is necessary for dealing with the particular point at issue" (qtd. in Rich 130). As Paul Rich has argued, the Advisory Committee on the Welfare of Coloured People in the UK represented the Colonial Office's application of "its policy of 'welfare colonialism' to Britain itself in the form of a voluntary segregationism aimed at defusing racial hostility" (Rich 161).²³

Ultimately, what brought all of the committees and enquiries discussed here together is the impact they had upon race relations in Britain, or what the LCP called "this most important national and international question—the Colour Bar."²⁴ In this respect, we can return to where this article began, to the work of St. Clair Drake. Drake had built up a respectful working relationship with many people in Cardiff, one of the liveliest centers of radical debate. When Kenneth Little's survey, *Negroes in Britain*, finally appeared in 1947, Drake worked with people in Cardiff to draft a reply that would be published in the *Crisis*. Their rebuttal displayed an unmistakable weariness with surveys and investigations that failed to address the real problems they faced: "[we] distrust people who survey us and study us, who write about us and publicize us, and who try to reform and lead us."²⁵ The repetition of these commissions and enquiries represented a crucial meeting point between the imprinting of specific fact and policy, and the elusive manner in which these same facts and policies confounded actual change. This disjuncture characterized the process of creolization and embodied the antithetical experience of race in Britain.

Conclusion

Commissions of enquiry into colonial matters were instigated by the British government as a moment of closure, an attempt to solve "problems" by mobilizing bureaucracy in an efficient demonstration of imperial resolve. But while commissions were intended as a bureaucratic apparatus that would control the terms of debate, black activists in Britain in the 1930s used them as a means of activating their colonial and racial identity. For the

individuals and groups discussed here, commissions were an active, not a passive, site for discussion; the beginnings of the discussion, not the ending of it. This is why it mattered so much that there were no people of color on the commissions.

While previous scholarship has highlighted the bureaucratic imperatives of the colonial commission of enquiry, and recognized the application of colonial events to metropolitan debate by black activists, these two attributes have not been sufficiently united. Colonial commissions of enquiry enabled colonial subjects in Britain to bring matters of race and empire to the fore. More than this, the specific ways in which commissions functioned—simultaneously as a delay tactic and as an avenue for the creolization of Britain—serve as a manifestation of how race functioned in imperial Britain. Commissions were both a site for discussion of race and empire, and a mode of their actualization. We can interpret commissions as an active reflection of the nature of race and empire themselves; that is, as mobilizing universalizing and specific discourses, and as engaging in open and hidden practices. The debates that emerged over the interpretations of the various commissions of enquiry surveyed here, led by colonial activists themselves, points precisely to the manner in which the combined racialized experiences of empire and diaspora intersected. The framework of creolization helps this conceptualization by emphasizing the aspect of contestation that emerged from specific historical moments. By understanding the dynamics of commissions, we better perceive the character of British racial logics. The politics of race was also, always, the politics of empire. And the creolization of Britain occurred as an active process whereby the colonial exterior and the metropolitan interior collided and, consequently, altered political debate.

NOTES

1. For the broader context of the relationship between racial politics in Britain and the USA see Kelley and Tuck, *The Other Special Relationship*.
2. For discussion of this see Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*; Fryer; Solomon; Rich; Bush, 230–34.
3. For a recent treatment of colonies as spaces of legal exception, see Spieler.
4. It is important however to note the change in racial discourses over time. In this quotation the Commissioner is referring to the differences between English and French residents.
5. For the impact of the Scottsboro case in Britain see Pennybacker. For the Italo-Abyssinian crisis in London see Matera, *Black London* 65–73; Robinson. For German appeasement via African territory see Pedersen 326–28.
6. Scholarship on these organizations and their activity has burgeoned in the past decade. For a representative sample of work see Bush 205–47; James; Killingray, “A Good West Indian”; Makonnen; Sherwood. For the LCP see Killingray, “To do something for the race.” For WASU and the IASB see Matera, *Black London*. For Padmore and the political networks of this time see James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*. For the NWA see Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism* 251–92.
7. See for example, Hogsbjerg, “A Thorn in the Side of Great Britain.”
8. The LCP’s AGM of March 1938 also passed resolutions protesting against police reaction to unrest in Barbados, and urging that peaceful Trade Union activity be allowed in Trinidad. See “Resolutions passed.”
9. Padmore also criticized the Trinidad report, and linked conditions in Trinidad with those in Barbados, in “Colonial fascism.”
10. Arthur Lewis to Harold Moody, 26 June 1938, St. Clair Drake Papers, Box 65, Folder 3.
11. Memorandum by Lloyd, 16 Sept. 1938, in CO 950/30.
12. Lively to Lloyd, 17 Sept. 1938; and Lloyd to Moody, 20 Sept. 1938, both in CO 950/30.
13. Moody to Lloyd, 22 Sept. 1938, in CO 950/30; Moody to Lloyd, 27 Sept. 1938, in CO 950/30.
14. See C. A. Moody to Lloyd, 12 Oct. 1938, and enclosed report on “West India Royal Commission: Ninth session,” 29 Sept. 1938, both in CO 950/30.
15. See Moody to Lloyd, 8 Oct. 1938, and Moody to Lloyd, 10 Oct. 1938, CO 950/30.

16. See Marson to Secretary of the Royal Commission, 15 Sept. 1938, CO 950/36.
17. W. Arthur Lewis, "Memorandum on social welfare in the British West Indies," 27 Sept. 1938, CO 950/56. Also Lewis to Secretary, Royal Commission, n.d. but 1938, CO 950/56; Lloyd to Lewis, 28 Sept. 1938, CO 950/56.
18. LCP *News Letter* (June 1941): 50–51.
19. LCP *News Letter* (Aug. 1941): 98.
20. Other quotations above are from the special section of this same issue, "Papers and Correspondence Relating to Appointments to the Colonial Service."
21. On the History of Aggrey House, see Whittall, "Creating Black Places in Imperial London"; Adi, *West Africans in Britain* 57–67.
22. On the workings of this committee, Moody's role within it, and some of the many hostels that it opened for colonial peoples in Britain, see the minutes of committee meetings and correspondence held in TNA, CO 876/17. See also Cole to Moody (25 Sept. 1942), and Moody to Cole (29 Sept. 1942), School of Oriental and African Studies Archives, Robert Wellesley Cole Papers, PP MS 35, Box 20, File 151.
23. On the origins of this committee, and its relationship to Aggrey House, see Whittall, "Creating Black Places in Imperial London."
24. LCP *News Letter* (Aug. 1941): 94.
25. Draft reply to *Negroes in Britain*, n.d., St. Clair Drake Papers, Box 65, file 103.

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