CHAPTER ONE

What is a West Indian?

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For C. L. R. James West Indian identity was something to be celebrated, associated as it was for him, with the whole of the Caribbean, from Cuba and Haiti to Martinique, Trinidad and Jamaica.¹ Its distinctive character he saw as intimately linked to its particularly modern history, with the plantation at the centre of a global capitalist system linking slavery with finance, industry and European domestic consumption. The intellectual tradition which came out of this history was associated for him with 'the struggle for human emancipation and advancement'. West Indian writers and social actors were 'a particular social product' producing a 'particular type of social activity which we can definitely call West Indian'. The carriers of this tradition were men such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, hero of the San Domingue revolution, J. J. Thomas, the Trinidadian schoolmaster who took on the celebrated Oxford professor James Froude, Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist born in Jamaica, Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquan poet and theorist of *négritude*, Frantz Fanon, also from Martinique, who became a critical anti-colonial voice, and Fidel Castro. They shared 'an ocean of thought and feeling' which provided the roots of what it was to be West Indian.²

James wrote his history of the revolution in San Domingue, *The Black Jacobins*, in 1938, after leaving Trinidad to live in the metropole, the place where journalists and writers from the colonies could hope to make a name for themselves. James was steeped in Victorian English culture, and perhaps was expressing in this book a confidence about the future which was characteristic of much Victorian thought.³ Such a desire for progress was also a tenet of the marxism which, from this period, he began to espouse. The book was about a revolution which, he imagined, would happen in Africa, and told the story of the one which had happened in Haiti. Reflecting on the writing of *The Black Jacobins* in 1971, James noted that his aim had been

to demonstrate that we had a history and in that history there were men who were fully able to stand comparison with great men of that period ... I was trying to make clear that black people had a certain historical past ... by the historical record I tried to show that black people were able to make historical progress, they were able to show how a revolution was made, they were able to produce the men who could lead a revolution, and write new pages in the book of history ...⁴

James's identification with the struggles of black people and the futures which were possible for him and them was central to his thinking. The capacities of black people and the part they had played in their own histories had been denied by the colonisers. His intellectual magic would allow others to see that heroic and tragic story and celebrate the distinctive West Indian virtues. His was a historical vision and consciousness. As Anthony Bogues argues, '*The Black Jacobins* is a rare text because it serves as marker for history, the practice of politics and a partial answer to the question of who and what is a Caribbean person'.⁵

The creation of intellectual traditions always involves inclusions and exclusions, remembering some and forgetting others. Roots 'are not hallowed artefacts shrouded in mystery, but rather we seem continually to dig them up according to our needs at particular points in time'.⁶ While James sought a tradition of struggle for freedom as characteristically West Indian, his fellow Trinidadian, V. S. Naipaul, had a much more deeply pessimistic view. Naipaul came to England in 1950 to study English literature at Oxford. Thirty years younger than James, he also sought to make his name as a writer. In 1961 he wrote *Middle Passage*, his account of a return journey to the West Indies. He took as his epitaph Froude's judgement on the islands in 1887. 'There are no people here in the true sense of the word', Froude had written, 'with a character and purpose of their own.' Naipaul shared this conviction. 'Nothing was created in the British West Indies', he wrote, 'no civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in Haiti or the American colonies. There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, neglect: the size of the islands called for nothing else.' Or, 'how can the history of West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt? The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.'⁷ This was a harsh legacy with which to live, the mirror-image, perhaps, of James's high-tragic conception of history.

These two contrasting visions have provided my starting point for exploring the legacy of being West Indian from which Caribbean intellectuals have developed their own sense of West Indianness and, inti-

mately connected with this, their sense of history. They inform my inquiry into the different meanings of West Indian – meanings which different generations have had to learn, confront and fashion anew. Like all the chapters in this book my investigation focuses on the metropole: what picture of the West Indian was generated in the metropole and for what purposes? When, how and where did a West Indian identity emerge? Who, at any one time, was included and who excluded? Like all cultural identities that of the West Indian is historically specific. But what kind of term was it? Did it refer to location, ethnicity, parentage, or culture? Did it refer to different groupings at different times? Is it perhaps an identity like ‘European’, a regional identity which transcended national borders? Was it ever conceived as a national identity? Could the West Indian islands be a nation? Who claimed it and when? I want to ask what a genealogy of the term would look like. Being a West Indian was neither fixed nor essential. My focus here is on the metropolitan lens: this is, of course, only a part of the story.⁸

The term West Indies is complicated in itself. Is it the West Indies of the colonial period, when the islands were named by their European ‘discoverers’? Is it the British West Indies, or the French or the Spanish or the Dutch? C. L. R. James’s West Indian consciousness crossed the whole of the Caribbean. My concern in this chapter, as with the other chapters in the book, is the islands, and parts of the mainland, which were colonised by the British from the early seventeenth century and named as the British West Indies. This process was in itself a long and complicated history of conquest, associated with the great European wars of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 1958, when the postwar migration of West Indians to Britain was well under way, and when a West Indian Federation came briefly into being, the participating territories comprised Jamaica in the western Caribbean, and Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Grenada, St Vincent, St Lucia, Dominica, Antigua, St Kitts, Nevis, Anguilla and Montserrat in the eastern Caribbean. Neither of the two mainland colonies, British Guiana (Guyana) and British Honduras (Belize) was included. These British West Indian colonies formed a link between North and South America and were strategically vital to the European powers, particularly in the era of the sailing ship. They shared a history, of colonisation, displacement, slavery, emancipation, indenture, nationalism and anti-colonialism: a history out of which a particular kind of West Indian identity has emerged, that of the anglophone Caribbean.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the first recorded use of the term West Indian, in 1597, serves both to describe the indigenous inhabitants of the islands, and to condemn the acts of another colonising power: thus, ‘those cruelties that were practised by the Spanish

nation upon the West Indians'. By 1661, only a few years after Cromwell's forces had taken Jamaica, the term had come to mean 'an inhabitant or native of the West Indies, of European origin or descent'. In a dramatic, if largely unacknowledged transformation, the West Indian had been whitened: he, and it is mainly he, is one of the settlers from England, Scotland or Ireland, fortune-seekers in the Wild West of the seventeenth century. This meaning held for many decades. As late as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in 1876, the *OED* notes, the West Indian was a byword for fabled wealth brought back to the metropole. By the 1960s, however, (according to the abbreviated genealogy the *OED* gives us) the West Indian had become black. So, *The Times* records in February 1957 that, '26,000 West Indians migrated to Britain in 1956'. Finally, the *OED* notes an inclusive use of the term West Indian in 1961: all inhabitants of the Federation, of European, African, American Indian, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese or Jewish descent are named as West Indian. 'In his message to West Indians on Christmas day Sir Grantley Adams, the Prime Minister of the Federation, spoke of West Indian unity.' 'Out of many one people', as the newly independent nation of Jamaica claimed in its national motto in 1962.

According to the *OED*, then, West Indian was initially associated with the indigenous inhabitants of the islands, then became a white identity and not until the 1950s, with the migration of African-Caribbean men and women to the metropole, did it register as black. As the Trinidadian John La Rose pointed out, 'When the term West Indian originated it was the Anglo West-Indian who claimed the honour of the description'. Yet it was to become 'an uncertain amalgamation'.⁹ It is the postwar generation of migrants who tell of their discovery of becoming West Indian in the metropole: their meeting for the first time with those from other islands of the Caribbean, and recognising a common identity in the face of shared histories and the shared need to confront the racial realities of their new lives in Britain. Sam Selvon, one of those who found a language in order to tell this story, put it this way:

When I left Trinidad in 1950 and went to England, one of my first experiences was living in a hostel with people from Africa and India and all over the Caribbean. It is strange to think I had to cross the Atlantic and be thousands of miles away, in a different culture and environment, for it to come about that, for the first time in my life, I was living among Barbadians and Jamaicans and others from my part of the world.

And he continues, 'As far as the English were concerned, we were all in one kettle of fish and classified as Jamaicans'.¹⁰ Islanders came to think of themselves as West Indian, while the English called them all Jamaican. Jamaica, the largest of the British West Indian colonies and

source of great wealth in the eighteenth century, had always been the island best known in England and continued to dominate the English imagination.

If we then turn to the *OED* for the meaning of Negro, we find it a term firmly tied to black skin. A Negro signified 'an individual belonging to the African race of mankind, which is distinguished by a black skin, black tightly-curved hair, and a nose flatter and lips thicker and more protruding than is common amongst white Europeans'. While the West Indian could be white or black, the Negro stayed Negro locked in his or her skin and hair.¹¹

Identities are brought into being through discursive or symbolic work, demarcating the self from the other. Identity is formed by 'the outside': by the interconnections of the positive presence of the self, and the negative and excluded dimensions distinguished as the other. Being English or being West Indian meant being some things and not others. This distinction between self and other, between included and excluded, carried with it a desire to mark the boundaries of social authority. That which is external to an identity, the 'outside', marks the absence or lack which is constitutive of presence. The African's 'excitability', for example, in nineteenth-century metropolitan discourse, was counterpoised to the Englishman's rationality; 'excitability' signalled an incapacity for both self-restraint or self-government. Or, the African's 'indolence' was contrasted to the Englishman's capacity for hard work. Englishness and West Indianness have always existed in relation to each other: they have been mutually constitutive over a long connected history. But the colonial relation has been one of power: the British were the colonisers – English, Scots and Welsh – while the majority inhabitants of the islands – Africans, and then, following emancipation, Indians brought in as indentured labour – were the colonised. Complicating that binary division of coloniser and colonised was the ambivalent status of the white settlers, the creolised natives of the islands, who became West Indians and claimed rights of self-government from the mother country. They were both colonisers and colonised, for at critical moments their power to govern themselves was overruled by the imperial parliament, critically in the case of emancipation which the planters opposed to the end. At such times the white West Indian creoles debated the virtues of separating from the mother country and aligning themselves to those who had thrown off colonial rule in the United States.

From the moment of its 'discovery' the West Indies has always been one kind of inside/outside to Britain. In the seventeenth century it was imagined in the metropole as a frontier, a place of danger and adventure, where fortunes could be made and few questions asked.¹² Initially the

destination of buccaneers and pirates, it became transformed into the sugar-bowl of Europe, part of the great plantation settlement which stretched from the southern regions of colonial America to Brazil. By the late seventeenth century the sugar regime, dependent on the labour of enslaved Africans, was established in Barbados and Jamaica, and the West Indies became renowned as the site of slavery, where fabulous wealth could be accumulated but where no white person – let alone a white woman – would care to live. It was an unEnglish kind of place. By the eighteenth century, the historian Kathleen Wilson argues, the Caribbean was associated with ‘ineffable otherness’. The wealthy planters represented forms of vulgarity, backwardness and degeneracy that inverted the standards of English civility and culture. The Caribbean became ‘the secret underground self’, she suggests, of English society and eighteenth-century representations of its rapacious and menacing characteristics circulated widely. Teresia Phillips, courtesan, memoirist, sexual predator and possible murderer, known in Jamaica as ‘the Black Widow’ and memorably invoked by Wilson, is only the most dramatic of these figures.¹³

The degeneracy of the West Indies in the English imagination is powerfully evoked in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, written in the years after the slave trade had at last been abolished in 1807. Sir Thomas Bertram is the complacent patriarch who rules Mansfield Park, the comfortable gentry home in the south of England where the main part of the novel is set. But that home relies for its comforts on plantations in Antigua and when troubles erupt on the island the absentee landlord has to go himself to reassert his authority, presumably over managers and the enslaved alike. But while he is away from home the young people at Mansfield Park, no longer restrained by his patriarchal presence, abandon the decencies of respectable society and break loose with theatricals. Their performance of illicit feelings mirrors the troubles in Antigua, where slavery threatens the destruction of civility, and more generally of English ways of life. Only the return of Sir Thomas, the husband and father, secures a reordering of domestic life.¹⁴

White inhabitants of the West Indies, however, were determined to counter the injurious views of them propagated in the metropolis and redeem their reputations. They wrote for both West Indian and British audiences, assuming a readership across metropole and colony. These were the organic intellectuals of the white West Indies, writers who articulated a distinctive creole identity and hoped to explode metropolitan prejudices. In 1774 Edward Long, an English planter who lived in Jamaica for twelve years but whose family had long connections with the island, published his influential *History of Jamaica*. A committed Whig, Long was strongly critical of the imperial government and creole

in his sympathies. He was concerned to reconcile the political liberties of the planters, Britons who had carried their natural rights as free men with them to the colonies, with the institution of slavery. Africa was imagined as a place of barbarism and terror, the West Indies a paradise in comparison.¹⁵ Long's chosen form was history, for like all those who followed him he had to establish the West Indies as a place with its own history, rather than an extension of the mother country. He combined this with encyclopaedic information on the island. This was a book which was to be endlessly cited, its harsh deployment of fixed racial difference providing an authority apparently rooted in empirical observation. It was drawn on by successive generations of those claiming white racial supremacy. Long distinguished between creoles or natives of the island, who could be white, black or Indian. Creole, in other words, simply meant born on the island. Creolised whites had particular characteristics which distinguished them from Englishmen. The men were 'tall and well-shaped', the sockets of their eyes tended to be deeper than those of the English, for this guarded them from the glare of the sun. The effects of climate produced varieties of feature amongst Europeans, Long argued, but could not explain the distinction between black and white. Creole men were remarkable for their excellent character, as were the women, apart from a regrettable lack of education and tendency to indolence. Both men and women generally had skins 'of a fainter white' than in England, and a 'suffusion of red' from the sun which gave them a healthy complexion. The mistaken notion that they tended to swarthy, Long opined, was because the English could not recognise the mixed parentage of those illegitimate children of the rich who were sent to expensive schools in the metropole, and passed for white. 'The genuine English breed', he insisted, 'untainted with these heterogeneous mixtures, is observed to be equally pure and delicate in Jamaica as the mother country'.¹⁶

By the time that Bryan Edwards, an Englishman who was a long-term resident of the island, was writing his history of Jamaica twenty years later, the accusations of metropolitan abolitionists of the immorality – especially of the sexual immorality – of the planters were in the forefront of his mind. He was determined to enlist British sympathy for the good work which the colonists believed themselves to be promoting in their rescue of Africans from barbarism. Edwards was a powerful advocate of the colonists' claims for the rights of freeborn Englishmen: these were men who had carried their natural rights with them to new settlements, outposts of the mother country. Once there, however, they developed characteristics and commitments particular to the West Indies and appropriate for the maintenance of colonial rule: their virtues were racially specific. 'There is something of a marked and predominant character

common to all the white residents', he argued, the 'leading feature' of which was 'an independent spirit and a display of conscious equality throughout all ranks and conditions'.¹⁷ The critical distinction on the island was that between freeman and enslaved, between white and black.

Lady Nugent, wife of the Governor of Jamaica in the early nineteenth century, was less kind about West Indians. She recorded her impressions of the island, and was shocked by the effects of climate, as she saw it, on the habits of the Europeans. 'In the upper ranks', she remarked, 'they become indolent and inactive, regardless of everything but eating, drinking and indulging themselves, and are almost entirely under the dominion of their mulatto favourites'. In 'the lower orders', they were even worse, for 'conceit and tyranny' were added to their vices, alongside their treatment of 'Negroes as creatures formed merely to administer to their ease, and to be subject to their caprice'.¹⁸

By the late 1820s the Rev. George Bridges, Rector of St Ann's Bay in Jamaica, again an Englishman who had settled in the West Indies, adopted a much shriller tone than that of the apparently moderate Bryan Edwards. Bridges too set out to defend the planters against the imprecations of what was now a powerful abolition movement. The anti-slavery activists in the metropole had set their sights on being rid of the system of slavery itself, while at the same time the enslaved were increasingly vocal in defence of their right to freedom. Bridges wanted to rally the defenders of slavery, both in the islands and at home, against the gathering threats to their interests. He aimed to justify racial inequalities, and argued that for the foreseeable future Africans needed the civilising hand of Europeans. Bridges sought to strengthen the spirit of the white population, whose exertions he saw as paralysed by the climate. 'An Englishman', he argued, 'born beneath a sky of varying temperature, is continually sensible of new impressions, which keep his senses awake. He is vigilant, active and inconstant as the air he breathes.' 'The West Indian', he continued, 'who is constantly exposed to the same intolerant temperature, to the same oppressed sensations, is listless, languid, and dejected'.¹⁹ Such were the contrasting varieties of whiteness.

But a further complication arises from the fact that West Indian and English could also be seen as one and the same. Those in Britain who had interests or properties on the islands were also known as West Indians. From the late seventeenth century West Indians – in this sense of the term – had taken to meeting in London to defend their common cause. In 1781, as part of the reaction to the American Revolution, the Society of West India Planters and Merchants had been formed.²⁰ As B. W. Higman has shown, the West India interest included those 'at home' as well as in the colonies. It included 'almost every person who is connected with the colonies, either in respect of West Indian property,

or as a West India merchant'. Its personnel were constituted by an inner ring of those born in the islands, who had been members of the colonial assemblies or who had held office there. There were, too, absentee planters and merchants who had never visited the colonies. Finally there were the colonial agents, relatives and friends, naval and military men who had served in the islands. The task of the West India interest was, especially as the anti-slavery movement became increasingly active, to lobby the government and counter the abolitionists. They established regular meetings, set up an active committee, raised funds to vindicate themselves when misrepresented in the press, paid an agent whose job it was to organise their interests on every front, and employed lecturers to tour the country making the case for slavery. In the unreformed House of Commons the West India interest was able to summon up considerable numbers of votes. By the early 1830s this had shrunk as the economic and political problems of the plantations discouraged investment. Eighteen peers sitting in the House of Lords were compensated after abolition, indicating that some of the British aristocracy were still substantial West Indian property owners.²¹

By 1831, when the tide was turning on the question of abolition and when its inevitability seemed increasingly certain, the House of Lords, mindful of its members' interests in the Caribbean and hoping to delay emancipation, inaugurated a Select Committee on slavery. Some of the Committee members were themselves West India proprietors. The witnesses were planters, merchants, medical and military men, judges, attorneys, colonial officials, Anglican clergy and dissenting missionaries – all those who could claim West Indian experience. One ostensible subject of investigation was the character of 'the African': what kind of a man was he, what kind of a woman was she?²² But another preoccupation concerned white West Indians: a number of the witnesses were keen to mark off their characteristics from those of the Englishman. Every night at the West India Club the members discussed what was going on in the Committee. It was impossible, reported the planter John Baillie, for 'a West Indian to carry on a conversation when so mighty a Question is before this Committee'. Everything came back to the deliberations in the House of Lords. This was the first time that the evidence of the plantocracy, as to what life was like on the plantations, had been seriously challenged. And now it was challenged by dissenting missionaries, by men who had seen the effects of slavery with their own eyes. Those still supporting slavery told stories of contented Negroes, suffering from no coercion or severity: 'my sleek well-fed Negroes', reported the attorney William Shand, 'would form an extraordinary contrast with the wretched half-starved weavers in Angus and Kincardineshire'. The moral tone of Kingston, insisted William Burge, the paid agent of

the Jamaican planters, was no lower than that of England. Indeed, it could be favourably contrasted to London. The accusations of rape and depravity on the plantations had no basis in truth. But the missionaries had other stories to tell: of the sound of the whip across the islands, of the licentiousness and cruelty, of the scale of concubinage, of the profoundly unEnglish behaviour of the West Indians. As Admiral Sir William Lawrence Halsted, who had served as a naval commander in the Caribbean, was constrained to put it, 'Of course, as an Englishman I cannot possibly advocate anything like Slavery in England'.²³ England was one thing, the West Indies another. By the 1830s it was clear that in the public mind slavery and the ideals of England could no longer coexist. West Indians, it followed, could not be English.

If there recurred a recurrent *lack* of identity between West Indian and English, so too doubts could arise about the West Indian creoles as white – the formal colouration of their skin notwithstanding. For even early in the nineteenth century, the idea of the West Indian could also signify inhabitants of the islands who were not white. In the first years of the wars with France in the 1790s, the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in the West Indies had written to the Home Secretary. He proposed a corps of one thousand 'blacks and Mulattoes' who, he opined, would make better soldiers than the regular troops since they were accustomed to the climate. The enemy had shown the way, he pointed out: enslaved black men had been armed by the French during rebellions in San Domingue and Martinique, and had been found to be good fighters. White West Indians were appalled by such a proposal and successfully used the West India Committee to lobby against what was, to their mind, a dangerous plan. They were fearful both of British involvement in island affairs, for they greatly valued their independence, and of the spectre of armed black men. Following a Carib rising in St Vincent and Grenada, however, new regiments of black troops were authorised from London. Finding that the supplies of available men were limited the British army began to buy enslaved men, and it is estimated that at least 13,000 were bought before the abolition of the slave trade. 'The British Army became the biggest single purchaser of slaves anywhere in the Westindies [sic].'²⁴

These men formed the new West India Regiments, two of which were to survive until 1926. From the beginning it was envisaged that the officers would be white and the soldiers black or coloured. Since few free men, either black or coloured, enlisted, the majority of the troops were subject to the slave code until 1807, when the British government imposed its will on the colonial assemblies and freed all serving men. From then on, free black men, stationed in the Caribbean, were central to the survival of white West Indians. The island authorities strongly

objected to having these troops on their territories. Jamaica would not even countenance free men of colour for 'they would entertain notions of equality, and acquire habits pernicious to the welfare of the country'.²⁵ As a traveller to Jamaica wrote in 1823, 'The embodying and employing of such a corps in the West Indies is considered by the inhabitants, and doubtless with much reason, as an impolitic step. The more perfect these troops may become in their discipline, the more dangerous and formidable they would be in case of defection ...'.²⁶ But nor did the settlers wish to be responsible for their own defence, and so they were forced to accept the West India regiments, who throughout the nineteenth century provided military protection for the colonies and were used against black resistance and rebellions.

The naming of black regiments as West Indian fractured the prevailing image of West Indian as signifying an exclusively white identity. Similarly the militia in Jamaica, which was essential to the maintenance of white authority, included free men who were black, coloured, or Jewish (for there had been Jewish settlement on the island), though again all officers were white. As Kamau Brathwaite has pointed out, this was a creole institution from its inception in 1681, for there were too few white men to be able to have an exclusively white militia.²⁷ The position of free men of colour imposed another complicating factor. From the early 1790s, in the wake of the revolution in San Domingue, the so-called free coloureds in Jamaica, originally the offspring of white masters and enslaved women, who suffered from restricted economic, political and legal rights, began to make claims for equality. In 1823 a campaign began: a petition was organised across the island, the leadership made contact with the anti-slavery movement and sought British government support. In 1830, the Jamaican House of Assembly, fearful that coloured people would unite with the enslaved, granted them the same economic, legal and political rights as enjoyed by the white community. In the wake of the great rebellion of 1831 and the passing of emancipation, some coloured men formed an opposition in the House of Assembly. They argued that they represented the interests of the island more effectively than the white population, many of whom were still absentee proprietors and who believed England to be home.²⁸ These men were some of the first to identify themselves as distinctively Jamaican. Their home was not England but the island on which they were born, lived and died. This entrenchment of a coloured creole mentality disrupted the division between black and white and highlighted other layers of West Indian identity.

Emancipation marked a critical break in ideas about the West Indian. From 1838, the time of full emancipation, the possibility of black

self-government was always present, even if envisaged to be far in the future. West Indian could no longer be conceived of as a predominantly white identity. The islands had majority black populations and the numbers of mixed-race men and women were fast increasing. These people were all there to stay. The 1820s had seen the revival of anti-slavery feeling, once it had become clear that the ending of the slave trade was not going to result in the ending of the system of slavery. The combination of a popular campaign on a massive scale, the declining fortunes of the plantations and a major revolt of the enslaved in Jamaica in 1831 led to the abolition of slavery in 1834, and of apprenticeship (a form of fixed-term labour introduced to appease the planters) in 1838. There was great enthusiasm amongst the British public for the 'great experiment' of emancipation. The abolitionist conviction that black men and women could, with education and guidance, become like white, industrious workers and domesticated wives and mothers, was widely shared. The Colonial Office expected the plantation economy to continue but believed that black men would increasingly become small property owners, acquire the franchise and eventually have significant power in island affairs. But such opinion was relatively short-lived. By the late 1840s contrary perceptions emerged in Britain as the plantation economies of the islands went from bad to worse and as the plantocracy blamed the endemic laziness of 'the Negro'.²⁹ Yet at the same time West Indian whites were still regarded with considerable suspicion in the metropole, as not quite white. Indeed the West Indies was increasingly seen as a troublesome place in every respect, with planters who made constant claims on the British and expected to give nothing in return, and a black population who were deemed to be lazy, thus bringing the 'gift' of emancipation into question.

It was in this moment that William Thackeray wrote *Vanity Fair*, a historical novel and one of C. L. R. James's favourites.³⁰ Thackeray's novel of 1847–48 offers an extraordinary imperial panorama, set at the time of Waterloo. The novel is permeated with empire – from Sambo, the Sedleys' grinning black footman who appears on the very first page, to Jos Sedley who has made his fortune in India, the Irish Colonel O'Dowd and his vulgar wife Peggy, to the hypocritical Pitt Crawley, friend of Wilberforce, with his love for Negro emancipation, the Chickasaw Indians and the Ashantee mission. And there is Miss Swartz, the West Indian heiress. From her first appearance she reminds us of racial mixing, the prevalence of which threatens all attempts to define West Indian as white. She is described as 'the rich woolly haired mulatto from St. Kitts'. She is impetuous, generous and affectionate. Her 'jet black hair' is 'as curly as Sambo's', 'her diamonds as big as

pigeon eggs are set off by her mahogany complexion'. She has 'no one knows how many plantations in the West Indies, a mansion in Surrey, a house in Portland Place, a deal of money in the funds and three stars to her name in the East India stockholders list'. Her father is supposedly a German Jew, 'a slaveholder in the Cannibal Islands'. 'I'm not going to marry a Hottentot Venus', declares the insufferable George Osborne to his domineering father who wants him to marry for money.³¹ The West Indian heiress carries the instability of West Indian identity inscribed on her body, and in her lack of 'polish', her ignorance, her failure to learn how to be a lady at Miss Pinkerton's Academy. She is patently not an Englishwoman, marked as she is with the polluting taint of the African. It is this threatened mixing of blood which works, decisively, to distinguish West Indians from the English.

At the same time, in 1847, Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre*, with its well-known representation of West Indian degeneracy portrayed in the figure of Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife, the mad woman in the attic, the crazed, violent, bestialised, creole figure who haunts Thornfield Hall. But Bertha is not the only West Indian in the novel. As Sue Thomas has noted, her brother Richard, who arrives from Jamaica, also carries the signs of degeneracy in his face, features and body. As Jane Eyre herself described him, he was a fine looking man at first sight, but 'his features were regular but too relaxed: his eye was large and well cut but the life looking out of it was a tame, vacant life'. He was handsome but repulsive, 'there was no power in that smooth-skinned face of a full oval shape; no firmness in that aquiline nose and small cherry mouth; there was no thought on the low, even forehead: no command in that blank, brown eye'. The contrast with the rugged, powerful, physically energetic and thinking Rochester could not be more striking.³² Here was West Indian man and Englishman, two irreconcilable kinds of whiteness. The late 1840s saw an increasing preoccupation with racial thinking: whether in relation to the differences between one kind of whiteness and another, between Anglo-Saxons and Negroes or between Anglo-Saxons and Celts, a matter of serious concern given the growing presence of the Irish in Britain.³³

Two years later Thomas Carlyle published his 'Occasional discourse on the Negro question', an essay which was to mark a watershed in metropolitan thinking about race. Refusing the abolitionist orthodoxy on the potential of black men and women to be civilised, Carlyle argued that white people were born to be lords and black people to be mastered. This was the lesson that should be learned from emancipation: equality between the races was neither desirable nor practical. It was also unnatural. Black men could not civilise themselves, would not work without compulsion, could not possibly govern themselves. Englishmen should

face their responsibilities as empire-builders and reassert their control in the West Indies.³⁴

The three most influential metropolitan books on the West Indies to be published in the second half of the nineteenth century were all written in the wake of Carlyle and indebted to him: Anthony Trollope's *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859); Charles Kingsley's *At Last: a Christmas in the West Indies* (1872) and James Anthony Froude's *The English in the West Indies or The Bow of Ulysses* (1887).³⁵ Those of Kingsley and Froude were also written in the aftermath of the rebellion at Morant Bay in Jamaica of 1865, after which majority opinion in England had concluded that black people were certainly not yet fit for self-government.³⁶ All three texts were to have a long life, evident not least in the fact that they were to be much quoted by Naipaul in his gloomy assessment of Caribbean civilisation.

Trollope was in the very early days of his success as a writer when he was sent by his employer, the Post Office, to investigate postal services in the West Indies, and decided to write a travel book recording his impressions. The book was an immediate success, the first of his series of traveller's tales.³⁷ By the time he arrived in the Caribbean, freedom had been enjoyed for over twenty years, and in Guiana and Trinidad substantial immigration, in the form of indentured Indian labour had altered the balance of the races. It also added new complexities as to forms of belonging in the Caribbean, for when did the East Indian become West Indian? Trollope aimed to describe the peoples of the West Indies, white, black, brown and coloured, all of whom he saw as necessarily having a future in the islands. 'The Negro population is of course the most striking feature of the West Indies', he wrote, for to a white man the sight of a majority black society was indeed astonishing. The West Indian Negro knew nothing of Africa and saw himself as immeasurably superior to Africans. Yet creolised Africans were, he observed, 'a servile people in a foreign land', 'they have no country of their own, yet they have not hitherto any country of their adoption'. Inevitably, however, that creolised African had, in Trollope's mind, to be a West Indian. He was clear that slavery could never be restored for it was 'a system abhorrent to the feelings of a Christian Englishman'. Yet black men were created by God as 'an inferior race' and if left to themselves would become savage again. They had no desire to work, and labour for Trollope, as for Carlyle, was a great civiliser. They needed the guidance of those more educated and advanced and intelligent than themselves. Yet Trollope thought that the days of the Anglo-Saxons might well be over in the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica. The white men on the island were 'hospitable, affable and generous', but they abhorred hard work and thought of England as home. They

dreamed of the mother country rather than improving the island. It was the coloured men that he saw as capable of inheriting the future, though he was sharply critical of the character of coloured women, with their traditions of illicit sexuality and illegitimacy. 'Providence has sent white men and black men to these regions in order that from them may spring a race fitted by intellect for civilization; and fitted also for physical organisation for tropical labour'. Unlike many of his contemporaries, particularly the 'racial scientist' Robert Knox, Trollope favoured miscegenation and saw West Indian as a hybrid category. The coloured population, alongside the Indians and Chinese who had come to the Caribbean, represented the future. Africa could mix with Asia and the West Indies would survive without Anglo-Saxons: for they had left their mark and done their work. Like many mid-Victorians, Trollope was not convinced that dependencies (those colonies with majority non-white populations) were critical to England's future: Britain should be content to let these tropical colonies go their own way.³⁸

Charles Kingsley's perspective was somewhat different. Clergyman, writer and social activist, Kingsley had been sympathetic to radicalism in the 1840s. By 1872, however, when he went to the West Indies, he had abandoned his earlier views on the potential of black men and women to become equal and was convinced that races were born into inequality. Yet for him, as for Trollope, there was no gainsaying the mixed population of the islands. Bred on the tales of his West Indian forefathers (his grandfather was a well-to-do Barbadian planter and judge, his mother born in the family home there) he had long felt a connection with the West Indies and longed to see the islands.³⁹ Kingsley believed that 'the gallant race of planters and merchants' was recovering its prosperity and that if only more young English men and women would emigrate they would be able to be 'a little centre of civilization for the Negro, the Coolie'. While Negroes were still savages, 'Coolies' came from a decayed and idolatrous civilisation. But if Negroes left much to be desired then the British bore responsibility for this: 'we brought him here, and we have no right to complain of our own work. If, like Frankenstein, we have tried to make a man, and made him badly; we must, like Frankenstein, pay the penalty'. Like Trollope, Kingsley saw hope in coloured people, who claimed to be, and indeed were, 'our kinsfolk', partially white, and 'a race who ought, if they will be wise and virtuous, to have before them a great future'.⁴⁰ They should be encouraged to become landholders and producers in a small way, while white people should continue to rule the islands.

By the 1880s, when Froude travelled to the West Indies, a growing body of influential English intellectuals were convinced that the

destiny of the nation needed to be harnessed to the larger empire overseas and that enthusiasm for empire needed to be revived. Froude, intimate friend and biographer of Carlyle, was a passionate advocate for empire, but deeply sceptical of the propriety of extending any form of self-government to dependencies where there existed a black majority population. While he believed that colonists of the white settlements were 'part of ourselves', an extension of the great Anglo-Saxon race, India, or the West Indies, or indeed Ireland, were a different matter entirely. At the time of his visit to the Caribbean there was an expectation in the Colonial Office that a West Indian federation would be formed, and that eventually this would be self-governing. This was the context for Froude's diatribe against black people, which turned on his conviction of the immovability of black inferiority and on his appeal to white Britons to take seriously their responsibilities in the region and recover the heroic traditions of their forefathers. He was convinced that his own generation of Englishmen could rise to the challenge and restore white influence. 'The sections of men on this globe are unequally gifted', he believed: some were strong and could govern themselves, others needed to be governed. 'It will be an ill day for mankind', he wrote, echoing Carlyle, 'if no one is to be compelled any more to obey those who are wiser than himself'. He saw no evidence of improvement amongst black men and women, 'they have shown no capacity to rise above the condition of their ancestors except under European laws'. They were servants to be ruled with impartiality. For Froude the only true West Indian was a white West Indian, an Anglo-West Indian, one who could demonstrate his connectedness with the English. 'Those beautiful West Indian islands were intended to be homes for the overflowing numbers of our own race, and the few that have gone there have been crowded out by the blacks.' It was essential that England should support those white men whom they put on those islands, for they were like 'one of our limbs'. England must once again regard 'the West Indies as essentially one with herself'.⁴¹

Froude's return to an insistence on white West Indians as 'part of ourselves', as the key to a Caribbean future, provides an endpoint to this preliminary charting of the shifting meanings of West Indian. For it was Froude's book which provoked J. J. Thomas, the Trinidadian schoolmaster and educationalist, to speak back to the metropole. *Froudacity: West Indian fables explained*, first published in London in 1889, provides one of the symbolic starting points for a new kind of West Indian identity – one in which brown and black men, and it was mostly men, could claim collective rights as islanders, as diasporic Africans, as West Indians, and as Britons, citizens of the empire. The history of anti-

colonialism and nationalism, of the failed attempt to establish a West Indian Federation, and of the winning of independence in the British Caribbean is not my story here. Suffice it to say that what was clear from the West Indian response to Froude, in articles and letters in the press as well as in Thomas's text, was that it was no longer possible to maintain the fiction that the West Indian was white.

Thomas took it upon himself to take apart the arguments of the esteemed Oxford scholar and Victorian man of letters and to demonstrate, in their place, the capacities of black men. He deployed an inclusive notion of West Indianness, making reference to 'my fellow-West Indians, men of various races'. He insisted on the racially mixed nature of the population, and argued that this was a long established feature of the islands. But he also focused on the achievements of 'us West Indian Blacks', meaning all those of African descent.⁴² As Faith Smith argues:

To a travelogue asserting colonial incompetence, black pathology and primitivism, Caribbean backwardness, and England's continuing need to govern, Thomas systematically challenged these metropolitan assertions, offering the accomplishments of black people throughout the African diaspora as proof of the imagination and creativity that would rehabilitate African people, and stressing the ability of British Caribbean residents generally to chart their own destinies.⁴³

Arguments such as this were to be replayed throughout the rest of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, as brown, black and indeed white creolised West Indians claimed their rights to citizenship, self-government and nationhood. Island nationalists had been active in the islands for some time, G. W. Gordon in Jamaica in 1865, or Theophilus Scholes or Robert Love in the 1880s and 1890s, claiming rights as Jamaicans. It was the colonial relation, the power of the metropole in defining the British territories in the Caribbean as connected, which drove nationalists towards a West Indian, alongside an island, identity.⁴⁴ For all West Indians the deep, shared experience of colonialism was a powerful bond. Yet at the same time the British had kept the islands 'unnaturally apart', in G. K. Lewis's phrase, for three centuries, for 'colonialism decreed that the avenues of communication should be between each individual West Indian fief and London rather than the territories themselves'.⁴⁵ While colonial officials from the 1860s onwards periodically proposed the idea of a West Indian federation as an administrative solution for the region, the British could barely comprehend what was required in order to foster a sense of West Indian nationhood. In the event, it was anti-colonialism which bound the island nationalists together.

It is with J. J. Thomas, as we have seen, that C. L. R. James began his

construction of a tradition of distinctively West Indian intellectuals, the tradition which the chapters in this book explore. West Indian is a term which has now fallen, for the most part, into disuse. It survives as a trace of a once bolder, more visible, more heroic history. For a time West Indian was also used to describe the independent intellectual traditions which we describe in this book, and the peoples who migrated to Britain after 1945. But these traditions have now been reconstituted, as Caribbean, or African-Caribbean, or as black – raising new questions about the inclusion of Indians or Chinese or creole whites. West Indian is part of an older tradition of both colonial and anti-colonial thought. Yet even if it is a category which has been superseded, it needs to be interrogated and understood, for it illuminates not only the formation of the historical realities of the Caribbean, but of the metropole too.

The question 'What is a West Indian?' was never finally settled, as perhaps by now we might expect. In part at least such issues, turning on the dynamics of identity, remain forever open. But the chapters which follow pose further questions, which may be equally difficult to resolve. How do the many varieties of Caribbean thought, formed deep in the histories of colonialism, speak to our own historical present? And how can they illuminate the contemporary mentalities of the old metropolis?

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Stuart Hall, Bill Schwarz, Gail Lewis, all the participants at the two-day symposium on this collection of essays and those who discussed a version of my paper at the Caribbean seminar, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, November 2001.
- 2 C. L. R. James, 'The West Indian intellectual', introduction to the New Beacon edition of J. J. Thomas's *Froudacuity: West Indian fables explained* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1969), pp. 27 and 45.
- 3 See Simon Gikandi, 'The embarrassment of Victorianism: colonial subjects and the lure of Englishness', in John Kucich and Diane Sardoff (eds), *The Post-Victorian Frame of Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 4 C. L. R. James, 'Lectures on *The Black Jacobins*', *Small Axe*, 8 (2000).
- 5 Anthony Bogues, 'Afterword', *Small Axe*, 8 (2000), p. 114.
- 6 Faith Smith, 'A man who knows his roots: J. J. Thomas and current discourses of black nationalism', *Small Axe*, 5 (1999).
- 7 V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: André Deutsch, 1962), pp. 27–9.
- 8 It should also be noted that since my own historical work has focused on Jamaica my knowledge of the West Indies is heavily skewed in that direction. Furthermore, as a historian of the nineteenth century, my inquiry is centred on that period.
- 9 John La Rose, 'All are consumed', in Bhikhu Parekh (ed.), *Colour, Culture and Consciousness: immigrant intellectuals in Britain* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), p. 120. I am grateful to Anna Snaith for this reference.
- 10 Sam Selvon, 'Three into one can't go', in David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (eds), *India in the Caribbean* (London: Hansib, 1987), pp. 16–17.
- 11 I am not dealing here with the shifts in terminology associated with blackness. See, for example, Stuart Hall, 'New ethnicities', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies* (London: Routledge, 1996).

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- 12 Richard S. Dunn, *The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies 1624–1713* (London: Cape, 1973).
- 13 Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- 14 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; first published 1814). For a particularly interesting reading of this see Moira Ferguson, 'Mansfield Park: plantocratic paradigms', in her *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean connections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 15 Elsa V. Goveia, *A Study on the Historiography of the British West Indies to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Mexico City: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1956).
- 16 Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols (London: Frank Cass, 1970; first published 1774). See especially Book II, pp. 261–85.
- 17 Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 4 vols (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, 1806), vol. 2, p. 202.
- 18 Lady Maria Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal: Jamaica one hundred years ago*, ed. Frank Cundall (London: West India Committee for the Institute of Jamaica, 1934), p. 131.
- 19 George Wilson Bridges, *The Annals of Jamaica*, 2 vols (London: Frank Cass, 1968; first published 1828), vol. 2, pp. 10–11.
- 20 Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 111.
- 21 B. W. Higman, 'The West Indian "interest" in parliament 1807–33', *Historical Studies*, 13:49 (1967), pp. 1–19.
- 22 For a longer discussion of this see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination 1830–1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), especially pp. 107–15.
- 23 *Parliamentary Papers* 1831–32 (127) CCCVI, vols 11 and 12, Select Committee of the House of Lords on the state of the West India Colonies: vol. 11, pp. 93, 239 and 299.
- 24 Brian Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve: the story of the West India Regiments of the British Army* (St John's, Antigua: Hansib Caribbean, 1997), pp. 15 and 23.
- 25 Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, p. 25.
- 26 J. Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica*, quoted in Dyde, *The Empty Sleeve*, p. 61.
- 27 Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society*, p. 26.
- 28 On this history see Gad J. Heuman, *Between Black and White: race, politics and the free coloreds in Jamaica 1792–1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1987).
- 29 For a longer discussion of this see Hall, *Civilising Subjects*.
- 30 C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).
- 31 William M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968; first published 1848–49) pp. 42, 244–5 and 256.
- 32 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; first published 1847), p. 219; Sue Thomas, 'The tropical extravagance of Bertha Mason', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27:1 (1999), pp. 1–17.
- 33 Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).
- 34 Thomas Carlyle, 'Occasional discourse on the Negro question', *Fraser's Magazine*, 40 (Dec. 1849), pp. 670–9.
- 35 These three texts have all been extensively discussed by various authors. For a most illuminating reading see Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: writing identity in the culture of colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), especially chapter 3. My emphasis here is exclusively on the relevance of their writing to the question as to what is a West Indian.
- 36 Bernard Semmel, *The Governor Eyre Controversy* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1962).

- 37 For a longer discussion see Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, pp. 209–29.
- 38 Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), pp. 55–6, 61–3, 75, 81, 84, 98 and 226.
- 39 Charles Kingsley, *His Letters and Memories of his Life*, edited by his wife. 4 vols (London: Macmillan, 1901); Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: a life of Charles Kingsley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974).
- 40 Charles Kingsley, *At Last: a Christmas in the West Indies* (London: Macmillan, 1872), pp. 7, 90, 130 and 297–8.
- 41 James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies, or The Bow of Ulysses* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909; first published 1887), pp. 4–5, 182–4, 207–8, 252, 306 and 318–20.
- 42 Thomas, *Froudacity*, pp. 60 and 123.
- 43 Smith, 'A man who knows his roots', p. 2.
- 44 Patrick Bryan, *The Jamaican People 1880–1902* (Basingstoke: Macmillan with the University of Warwick, 1991). Thanks to Gad Heuman for drawing my attention to Robert Love.
- 45 Gordon K. Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies: perspectives on a new nation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1961), p. 18.