CHAPTER TEN

The Caribbean Artists Movement

Louis James

At a Conference of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) held at the University of Kent in 1969, C. L. R. James spoke with typical energy of his experience of growing up in Trinidad.

I didn't get literature from the mango-tree, or bathing on the shore and getting the sun of the colonial countries; I set out to master the literature, philosophy and ideas of Western civilization. This is where I have come from, and I would not pretend to be anything else. And I am able to speak of the underdeveloped countries infinitely better than I would otherwise have been able to do.¹

On the same occasion Edward (now Kamau) Brathwaite, as a founder member of CAM, spoke in a very different way about his attitude to growing up in a society dominated by Western culture.

The point I am making here is that my education and background, though nominally middle class, is, on examination, not of this nature at all. I had spent most of my boyhood on the beach and in the sea with 'beach-boys', or in the country, at my grandfather's with country boys and girls. I was not therefore in a position to make any serious intellectual investment in West Indian middle class values.²

The two statements are not necessarily in opposition. C. L. R. James was speaking of his fiercely independent reading in 'the literature, philosophy and ideas of Western civilization'. Brathwaite was reacting against the European tradition, as it emerged in his experience of 'West Indian middle class values'. Nevertheless, placed side by side, they point to the variety of attitudes and positions that fed into what became known, at its second meeting, as 'the Caribbean Artists Movement', or CAM.

CAM grew out of a small informal meeting held in a basement flat in Mecklenberg Square, London, on the evening of 19 December 1966. Six years later, when CAM as an organisation ended, it had made a major

impact on the emergence of a Caribbean cultural identity, particularly in Britain, where it also had changed attitudes within the host community. Anne Walmsley has written the indispensable history of CAM's activities, personalities and achievements.³ Other accounts wait to be written by the Caribbean members of CAM. This essay, emphatically, will not be a substitute for either. My perspective is that of a 'white' English academic who had the good fortune to be involved in CAM's activities from the beginning, but by upbringing and profession, inevitably remained outside the grass-roots elements in the movement.

The origins of CAM can be traced back some years before 1966, to the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona, Jamaica, where Edward Brathwaite had become a lecturer in the History Department in 1962. The University had opened its doors to students in 1949, and was already a creative force in the region. It was attracting young local talent that would previously have gone on to universities in Britain and the United States. The History Department, led by a group of outstanding West Indians, including Elsa Goveia, Douglas Hall and Roy Augier, was pioneering a new phase in Caribbean Studies. Members of the Departments of Sociology and Education were conducting research into the lives of the Jamaican underprivileged classes that later was to feed into Caribbean literature.⁴ The Departments of French and Spanish were mapping a Caribbean that went beyond the English-speaking West Indies.

The Department of English Literature stood out on the campus in keeping to a colonial academic framework. It kept strictly to the London University syllabus. The research of Robert le Page and Frederick C. Cassidy into Jamaican speech⁵ was kept separate in linguistics. English literature educated West Indians to read and write in the British tradition. (In fairness, it must be said that the same could be said of most Jamaican schools and many middle-class families at that time.) The Department radical was W. I. (Bill) Carr, an explosive, complex figure who wrote fiery anti-establishment articles for the opposition weekly, *Public Opinion*. He read and discussed Caribbean literature, particularly admiring the Jamaican novelist Roger Mais. But in teaching he was a follower of F. R. Leavis, committed to the 'great tradition' of English writers.⁶

I became a lecturer in English at Mona in September 1963. It was my second university post. I had been drawn to the new writing emerging from Africa and the Caribbean by a missionary childhood in what was then Northern Rhodesia. Entering the University of Hull Extramural Department in 1958, I taught my adult classes Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in rural Lincolnshire soon after its appearance, and used South African literature to discuss apartheid. I had also developed an interest in Jamaica, which became independent in 1962.

When I arrived on the Mona campus in 1963, what George Lamming

in *The Pleasures of Exile* had called the 'phenomenon' of postwar Caribbean literature in English⁷ was well under way. Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1952), George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1960) and Derek Walcott's *In a Green Night* (1962) were all in print. There was promise in the air. Several of my students, including Gordon Rohlehr, Victor Chang, Wayne Brown, Maureen Warner Lewis and Victor Ramraj, were to become leading Caribbean writers and academics. Derek Walcott had taken a degree in English, French and Latin at Mona in 1953, and by then was in Trinidad. But his younger compatriot, Wayne Brown, brought to my class for comment a draft of 'Noah', a remarkable poem later published in *On the Coast* (1972). There were other such excitements.

During my second year Norman Jeffares called the first Conference on Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds. It brought together an international group of academics (the UWI sent John Figueroa from the Department of Education, but no one from English), writers, broadcasters, publishers, as well as London representatives from the British Council and Arts Council. The Conference set up the Association for the Study of Commonwealth Literatures and Language (ACLALS), marking the institutional beginnings of Commonwealth and postcolonial studies. In 1965, I reviewed the published proceedings in *Caribbean Quarterly*, the academic journal of the Extramural Department, making a plea that the UWI English literature syllabus be widened to include Caribbean literature: 'there are certain things that University of the West Indies, in particular, should be doing'.⁸ Later, in 1970, the UWI at Mona was to host the second triennial Conference of ACLALS. But in 1965 my review went unnoticed. Pressure to bring the English syllabus into line with other developments in Caribbean culture came from elsewhere. Working in the early morning cool in my office, the rattle of my typewriter echoed that of Brathwaite working in the History Department above, and we became friends. He was working on poems he was to build into his longer work, *Rights of Passage* (1967), and researching into Jamaican popular culture.⁹ When I was asked to edit the first published book of essays on West Indian writing, I recommended that Brathwaite should be a contributor. But his enthusiasm for Caribbean folk culture had made his name anathema in the English Department. A Jamaican colleague protested against the idea so vehemently that I dropped the proposal, a decision I was bitterly to regret. The seed ideas of what was to become CAM were germinating in Brathwaite's activities at Mona in the previous decade.

In the summer of 1966 I returned to England to take up a teaching post at the University of Kent. Kent had been established in 1965, one

of the innovating 'plate-glass' universities founded in the 1960s. It emphasised interdisciplinary studies, and had a particular interest in 'Third World' societies. First year students were offered a course in 'Colonial Cultures', which combined literature and history from India, Africa and the Caribbean. Its popularity led, in 1967, to a course entirely devoted to African and Caribbean literatures. All this made it a natural seedbed for the ideas of CAM.

The year I came to Kent, Brathwaite followed, coming with his wife Doris to work on a D.Phil. under Donald Wood at the University of Sussex. Sussex, like Kent, had an interest in African and Caribbean studies, and the staff included Gerald Moore, who had joined the University from Nigeria, and was also to become a CAM supporter. Brathwaite had come to Britain with great hopes. West Indian artistic activity in London led him to expect a Caribbean community in hot debate about their regional culture. But nothing was happening. John La Rose, a Trinidadian who had come to London in 1961, was also anxious to bring together the West Indian 'novelists, poets, literary critics, painters and sculptors'.¹⁰ When the two met, drawn together by interest in each other's poetry, they decided to include the Jamaican writer and broadcaster Andrew Salkey, who 'knew everybody'. In December the three called the inaugural meeting in the Brathwaites' flat.

This was followed by a series of informal discussions which many of those who participated remember as providing their most valuable experience of CAM. Writers, painters, critics, teachers and theatre people met to discuss how their work related to a sense of a Caribbean culture. Those who had been separated by a fragmented Caribbean in London began to discover a common culture. The meetings included some from outside the Caribbean, drawn by shared interests. One of these was the young Leeds postgraduate, James Ngugi (later Ngugi wa Thiong'o), who applied the discussions to his own search for an African identity.

As the year progressed, an organisation began to take shape. The Movement appointed officers, set a small subscription (one pound), and produced a cyclostyled *Newsletter*, which printed CAM talks and interviews, correspondence, bibliographies, and publicised cultural events in England and the Caribbean. CAM used the West Indian Student Centre, Earl's Court, for public discussions. In September 1967, its committee organised a residential conference at the University of Kent which consolidated CAM's expanding interests in literature, painting and the performing arts. Its success led to a second at the University in 1968. But there was a growing opposition from black radicals against a grass-roots Caribbean movement becoming associated with what was seen as an elitist white establishment, and a third conference, in

1969, was non-residential and held at the West Indian Student's Centre in London.

Brathwaite had returned to the UWI at Mona the year before, in 1968. But in trying to organise CAM activities there he found that Jamaica was working out its own cultural agenda, and was in social and political turmoil. In 1969 CAM joined with the New World Group on the campus to run Sunday morning seminars on 'The arts in the Caribbean today'. However, CAM's major activity there became the publication of the periodical, *Savacou*, from 1970 to 1979, edited mainly by Brathwaite, Salkey and Kenneth Ramchand. The second number was retrospective, reprinting papers from CAM conferences and meetings. But the double issue *Savacou* 3-4 (1970/71) comprised a substantial anthology of contemporary Caribbean writing that aroused a storm of controversy because it included writing in the Rastafarian idiom by Bongo Jerry and Ras Dizzy. This in turn provoked a brilliant defence from the CAM member Gordon Rohlehr, of the use of the vernacular idiom in Caribbean verse.¹¹

In Britain, CAM played a significant role in the emergence of a new Caribbean strand in black British culture. Stuart Hall opened up the issues in his opening address to the second CAM conference. Here he defined black Caribbean culture as distinctively shaped by its slave past as being both in opposition to, and intimately involved with, Europe: an 'enemy within'. The crisis of identity that now faced a generation of British-born West Indians, also living within but apart from English culture, was CAM's concern. This proved true, and the special double issue of *Savacou*, 'Writing away from home' (published in 1974 but three years in the editing) is now recognised as the first anthology of black British literature.¹² In early 1971 the Commonwealth Institute rewarded CAM's encouragement of young painters by mounting a major exhibition, 'Caribbean artists in Britain'. In 1972 the opening of the Keskedee Centre in Islington offered an ideal venue for extending CAM activities to include a new generation of young West Indian talent. But the pioneering work had been done, and there was no committee intact able to take advantage of the new initiative.

CAM as a movement was too diverse to be easily defined. Brathwaite was its driving spirit, providing ideas and enthusiasm, insisting the movement include all the arts, drawing in and encouraging younger members, and open to new concepts. He had grown up on the most conservative of British West Indian islands, Barbados. His family had roots in the rural community but had become largely middle class, and Brathwaite was sent to the island's best school, Harrison College, where he received a rigorous education modelled on that of an English public school.¹³ Early, however, he showed independent tastes. He formed a

passion for jazz, music that the island 'culture censors' considered low and unsuited to a Harrison College boy. When, in the sixth form, he persuaded the Barbados Rediffusion radio station to let him broadcast programmes of blues and jazz music, there were scandalised protests, and the series was closed down after only two sessions.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in 1950 he won an island scholarship to Cambridge. It was a good place for a budding poet. Brathwaite's contemporaries included Thom Gunn, Peter Redgrove and Ted Hughes, with whom he remembers spending his last day in Cambridge. But in 1953 he read *In the Castle of My Skin* by his fellow Barbadian George Lamming, whom he also met when Lamming visited Cambridge friends. Brathwaite wrote later that he felt 'everything was transformed. Here breathing to me from every pore of line and page, was the Barbados I had lived. The words, the rhythms, the cadences, the scenes, the people, their predicament. They all came back'.¹⁵ He knew now he could not be an 'Afro-Saxon'. After graduation he took a certificate in education, and instead of returning home to join the Barbadian establishment, went to Africa, to what was then the Gold Coast to work from 1955 to 1962 in the Ministry of Education.

Brathwaite faced the frustrations of accommodating to African ways of life. But in retrospect these became forgotten. They were heady years. The country was progressing towards independence, and became Ghana under President Nkrumah in 1957. Brathwaite helped administer the education system of a new nation. As he worked in the Ghanaian villages, he became aware how much African traditional life had survived the Middle Passage into the Caribbean. He was touched by the welcome he received in the rural communities, experiencing warmth lacking in the formal Barbados society of his childhood. He felt 'welcomed back' to Africa, 'a stranger/after three hundred years'.¹⁶ His happiness there was deepened when, in 1960, he revisited Barbados and met Doris, born in Guyana, who had studied home economics in England. They fell immediately in love, were married within a month, and returned to share Brathwaite's last years in Ghana.¹⁷

In verse, Brathwaite was to write of this 'key period of my what I call my *de/education*' as being

like
 when I first saw through the eye of the navel/heard the drum speak God
 and cd talk of drum belly drum centred earth sounding culture
 like
 when I began to recognise the importance and meaning of ceremony ...
 ritual ... tradition ...¹⁸

The Ghana years changed Brathwaite's outlook on Caribbean history and culture. As he declared in the CAM talk already quoted, he now saw

his education in Barbados as playing with village boys on the beach, for it was they who had preserved their African roots.¹⁹ He was drawn to the sense of spiritual forces immanent in African ways of life, and wrote of them as connected by 'submarine'²⁰ links to the rituals and religious ceremonies of the Caribbean. In 1971 in a religious ceremony he was to change his name 'Edward' to 'Kamau'. He received the name, however, not in Ghana, but in Limuru, Kenya, from Ngugi wa Thiongo's grandmother,²¹ indicating his widening, Pan-African sense of identity.

Africa also changed Brathwaite's views of music and poetry. The rhythms of its rituals and song showed him the charismatic effect of the human voice in verse speaking. He heard the sounds that United States slave culture had preserved in the music of blues and jazz. He was later to read Marshall Stearns's *The Story of Jazz* (1956), and *Blues People* (1963) by LeRoy Jones (now Amiri Baraka), studies that related jazz to the history of black American peoples. The formation of CAM offered a public platform for these ideas. In February 1967, two months after its inaugural meeting, Brathwaite read a paper on 'Jazz and the West Indian novel'.²² In this he outlined 'a possible alternative to the European cultural tradition which has been imposed upon us and which we have more or less accepted and absorbed, for obvious historical reasons, as the only way of going about our business'.²³ Jazz was 'a spontaneous, open, improvisatory' form, centred in the 'belly', not the intellect. It related to the idiom that he saw emerging in the Caribbean novel. 'There is no West Indian jazz', he stated,²⁴ claiming, controversially, that Caribbean popular music had not evolved out of protest and spiritual chaos in the way that the American form had done. But the West Indian jazz aesthetic had emerged in the fiction now being written by such writers as George Lamming and Roger Mais.

Whatever the limitations of Brathwaite's thesis as an assessment of the West Indian novel, it brilliantly illuminated his own intentions as a poet. For his long poem *Rights of Passage*, which he charismatically performed at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, London, the following month, did indeed embody the qualities he saw in jazz – its questing, open-ended form, the melding of diverse cultural idioms and rhythms, a voice of hurt and yearning held within a celebration of a cultural identity. 'The "personal urge for words" [is] the West Indian writer's trumpet', he had written,²⁵ and as he declaimed, the rich tones of his voice, with its Barbadian lilt, soared like a trombone solo:

Drum skin whip
lash, master sun's
cutting edge of
heat, taut
surfaces of things

LOUIS JAMES

I sing
I shout
I groan
I dream
about ²⁶

In his performance, Brathwaite also assumed for the poet the role of a shaman. *Rights of Passage* took the form of a visionary quest, moving across time and space to create a tapestry of the lives of the common people within the black diaspora – plantation Uncle Tom, Jamaican Rastafarian, a shop full of Barbadian village women – each identity mediated through characteristic rhythms of speech or music. Weaving through it all was the poet's quest for cultural identity. In *Masks*, which followed in 1968, the seer returns, as Brathwaite had once done, to find roots in Africa; in *Islands* (in 1969), he went back to the Caribbean to revisit the scenes of *Rights*. The trilogy, collected as *The Arrivants* (1973), was to become a central document for CAM. The *négritude* movement had its Caribbean origins in Aimé Césaire's poetic *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939). In a similar way, Brathwaite's work grounded CAM not in a set of precepts, but in a creative work that opened up new dimensions of form and imaginative perception.

Brathwaite throughout his CAM activities was closely supported by his wife Doris. Her quiet good sense and radiant personality made a positive contribution to its meetings. In a similar way, John La Rose's work in CAM was indebted to the encouragement and organising skills of Sarah White. La Rose was, with Brathwaite and Salkey, a key figure in CAM. His quiet voice and unobtrusive manner were deceptive. He had been active in black radical movements both in the Caribbean and Britain.²⁷ He had grown up in an atmosphere of political debate absent in contemporary Jamaica or Barbados. He considered himself a marxist by the age of eighteen, and later rose to become General Secretary of the Trinidad West Indian Independence Party, and executive member of the island's Federated Workers Trade Union. In 1961 he came to England, bringing organisational experience and a network of contacts that would prove invaluable to CAM.

Where Brathwaite and Salkey had felt alienated from their middle-class upbringing, La Rose had grown up happily in Arima in rural Trinidad, part of a vibrant culture whose customs and festivals had readily assimilated influences from Caribs, Africans and cosmopolitan Europe. His enthusiasm for carnival and steel band music led him to see Trinidad popular culture as a key resource for the subversion of the colonial order. From 1956 to 1958 he worked closely with Raymond Quevedo (the calypsonian 'Attila the Hun') to write a ground-breaking study of the social significance of 'Kaiso', the forerunner of calypso.²⁸

But La Rose was never exclusively interested in popular culture. In Trinidad he also worked to encourage local theatre, writing and reading circles, and discussion groups. He enjoyed classical and modern music, and Wilson Harris remembers giving La Rose and Sarah spare tickets to Wigmore Hall concerts when they met in London in the early 1960s. Earlier, while working in Venezuela, La Rose had studied French and Spanish literature. This gave him a window on the creative literature emerging from the postwar cultural ferment of Cuba, Martinique, Haiti and Venezuela. Reading the work of Rafael Cadenas, Nicolás Guillén, Jacques Roumain and Aimé Césaire, he was able to place the English-speaking Caribbean in a wider scene, one in which British debates about race and identity appeared parochial. A sense of the region's complexity steered La Rose away from conceiving of CAM as a movement with a tightly specified programme. His greatest pleasure was in sessions that the Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams called 'warishi nights', using the Amerindian term for 'unburdening'. When it had created a Caribbean community in which hopes and ideas could truly be shared, CAM's purpose would have been achieved.

Such a community would need ready access to relevant books. His experience organising radical discussion groups in Trinidad had taught La Rose that the publication of Caribbean literature served the interests of London publishers and their British readers. CAM needed to gain control of book publishing and communications. In 1966 he had started his own independent West Indian publishing imprint, New Beacon Books, taking the name of the literary journal *The Beacon* (1931–33) with which C. L. R. James, Alfred Mendes and Albert Gomez had blazed new cultural trails in Trinidad in the 1930s. His first title was a slim volume of his own poetry, significantly titled *Foundations* (1966). For other founding texts he turned to John Jacob Thomas. As early as 1869, Thomas had laid a foundation from which to oppose the colonial Standard English by writing *Creole Grammar*, a study of Trinidad speech considered as an authentic and independent language. He later turned to British colonial attitudes writing his exemplary rebuttal of Froude, *Froudacity*. In Trinidad La Rose had to use Thomas's works in typescript. For La Rose in the late 1960s these had become obvious texts for New Beacon to promote.

New Beacon Books and CAM were to develop hand in hand. By republishing Thomas's pioneering studies alongside contemporary writings, La Rose and Sarah White provided an invaluable service to CAM; it was an intervention which did much to heighten CAM's recognition that it was the inheritor of an existent tradition of West Indian thought. La Rose and White began a book service for CAM members, and listed relevant publications in the *CAM Newsletter*. The New

Beacon bookstall became an important feature of CAM meetings. After particularly large sales at the 1967 CAM Conference, they opened a bookstore in their house in Stroud Green Road, in North London, to cater for an ever-growing demand for Caribbean and African titles.

The third founder member of CAM was Andrew Salkey. Salkey was a Panamanian-born Jamaican who had come to study English at the University of London in 1952, and had stayed. His marxist sympathies gave him a burning interest in the exploitation of West Indian immigrants. But his bent was literature, not politics, and he joined no party. Two finely crafted novels, *A Quality of Violence* (1959) and *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960), had given him a place in the first phase of postwar West Indian literature, and he became deeply involved in the evolution of Caribbean writing in London. He made it his business to know of new writers, and he and his wife Pat gave a warm welcome at their Moscow Road flat to any West Indian author living in or passing through London. Salkey used contacts made as a freelance broadcaster and editor to promote Caribbean writing on the BBC, and to encourage London publishers like Faber and Faber and André Deutsch to publish their work. Several authors, who might otherwise have remained unknown – including Wilson Harris – owe their first appearance in print to Salkey. He used his sharp eye for emerging talent to edit anthologies of West Indian short stories and verse,²⁹ volumes that marked out, with remarkable accuracy, the future shape of the field. He brought to CAM an encyclopaedic knowledge of Caribbean writers, and an interest in the wider region, particularly Cuba, whose fate after Fidel's revolution was always a matter of passionate debate in CAM discussions.

I was also invited to the evening of discussion that created CAM. My place in the movement was chiefly in organisation. For a while I was editor of the *Newsletter*, and CAM's liaison with the University of Kent for the two conferences held there. If I say something about myself, it is not because I was an important figure in the movement, but because my experience was representative of the issues CAM presented to the white, British academic community in general. Why did I commit myself to CAM so completely? Work as a young lecturer in a new university left me little spare time. Meetings could last deep into the night in London, leaving me to drink coffee with the newspaper reporters at the all night Black and White Restaurant in Fleet Street before driving back through the dawn to teach, bleary-eyed, my morning classes. My wife and four small children suffered even more.

I was also involved in a movement associated with black rights movements at a time of mounting racial tension. While the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act reduced black immigrants to second-class citizens, violent attacks on black people increased. There was much

racial anger. While Enoch Powell inflamed white reactionaries, black radicals were roused by the speeches of Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement in the United States. In the summer of 1967 the charismatic Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) visited England. John La Rose organised a meeting for black London activists to meet him, and Brathwaite was among the CAM members impressed when at a speech at the Round House, Carmichael called for worldwide black solidarity.³⁰ A strong presence at CAM meetings was Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* which, backed by Fanon's experience of the bloody Algerian war of liberation, asserted that only violence could shake off the psychic legacy of colonialism. At black activist centres like the West Indian Students Union, I was treated with an extraordinary courtesy that my black counterpart would certainly not have met with on the other side of the racial divide. Nevertheless, as a lone white Englishman with a university accent, I could not find them comfortable places. Most of my white colleagues kept well back from the battle lines.

I remained there, convinced that the lines of dialogue needed to be kept open, and passionately believing in the importance of CAM's work. But how far in fact could I truly identify with a Caribbean movement? My interest in West Indian literature, I realise now, was heightened by my own sense of cultural displacement. This originated partly in a South African childhood where, shuttled between boarding school and mission station, I was alternately bullied by my white and black peers. Michael Gilkes has identified the angst that featured often in the first wave of West Indian writing in English as a 'cultural schizophrenia'³¹ created by competing racial and cultural identities in the Caribbean. When I read of Guyana's Edgar Mittelholzer, suicidal at being born a 'swarthy' boy in a light-skinned family, or the conflicting African and European identities of Lionel/Lobo Froad in Denis Williams's *Other Leopards* (1963), I thought I felt a twinge of recognition. But this was misleading. Brathwaite's thinking in CAM was not concerned with 'cultural schizophrenia'. He believed that the Caribbean peoples should go beyond the divisions of history in order to see clearly the situation that existed in the present, to open the way to a creative culture that was, paradoxically, both 'torn and new'.³²

There was, too, the continuing CAM preoccupation with finding a true Caribbean idiom, whether in art, music or language. Even after my three years in Jamaica, armed with a glossary, I still had difficulties with Kingston patois. But comprehension was not the main problem. As John Figueroa once demonstrated with tape recordings, Caribbean speech was a local affair in which Barbadian speech could be unintelligible to a Trinidadian.³³ Moreover, Samuel Selvon in his short stories had brilliantly demonstrated that it was possible to write speech that

was both Caribbean and universally comprehensible, even to English readers. But the difficulty was that I had not been brought up with Caribbean language in my bones.

This landed me in controversy when the book of critical essays *The Islands in Between* finally appeared, a year after Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* had changed the literary landscape in which they had been written. In my introduction I had stressed the importance of Caribbean language, and made it obvious, as I thought, that West Indian writers had to use their own idiom. I added, rather clumsily, that 'for all its flexibility, its unique rightness for certain experiences, dialect is not precise or subtle enough to express all the complex fate of being a West Indian'.³⁴ In using the term 'dialect' there I had in mind particularly Louise Bennett's performance poetry, spoken in the persona of an ebullient Jamaican village woman, 'Miss Lou'. Bennett herself spoke of using 'dialect', and when her collection *Jamaican Labrish* (1966) was published, it was subtitled 'Jamaica Dialect Poems'.³⁵ Bennett's brilliant verse was instrumental in helping popular West Indian speech become accepted in Jamaican literary circles. I knew this. But I also had an eye on the work of writers like Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott who had a fine ear for Caribbean speech, but had incorporated the popular into other literary forms. Good as it was, I was saying, not all West Indian writing had to be like Louise Bennett's. But Brathwaite was furious. He saw that I wrote out of my English education, believing I could have little conception of a society where for generations of school children 'dialect' had been scorned as 'nigger speech', forbidden under threat of the cane. For Brathwaite, 'dialect' was a colonial term that had been used to break the culture of a subjugated people – hence, in part, his determination to create new concepts and think in terms of the people's 'nation-language'. By referring to Caribbean speech as 'dialect' I showed that I remained an English academic who could not see the profound resources of the vernacular speech of the Caribbean.

The Islands in Between was a slim volume, but it was the first book of criticism on West Indian writing in English, and appeared at the moment when radical Caribbean critics were looking for a crusty piece of colonial writing to get their teeth into. The Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter was not directly involved with CAM, but her scathing critique of my introduction to *Islands* in the *Jamaica Journal* became anthologised as marking a new phase in Caribbean criticism, and became part of CAM debates.³⁶ I had written of the need for a sympathetic understanding of the many cultural elements in the complex Caribbean region. This in itself was I thought obvious. But for Wynter, I was an English critic and, in appearing to strike a balance between different cultures from a 'reasonable' point of view, I was attempting to 'sketch

the history of the Caribbean from an Archimedian point outside the historical process'. My analysis, 'mediated to [my] bones by the colonial system, by the colonial myth', was irrelevant to the actual Caribbean.³⁷ Reading Wynter's critique, I was still left believing what I had written was broadly right, but looking back at the political context in which I had written, I can now understand her hostility.

For Brathwaite, too, my position presented problems of cultural ontology.³⁸ My search for a reasonable balance between the forces of history assumed a hidden centre, not so much outside the cultural framework, but within my European background. Western civilisation had been imposed on the Caribbean a eurocentric perspective in which Africa, its history and culture, was passive and subordinate. But Africa and its civilisations were neither passive nor subordinate. Moreover, the great majority of Caribbean peoples had originated there. For them, the centre was Africa, not Europe. Once the African centre had been recognised, the significance of Caribbean culture, its customs, rituals, art, music, folklore, language and above all, its religion, took on their true meaning.³⁹

Brathwaite's concern with the continuation of colonised attitudes in the Caribbean was incisively reinforced in the paper, 'The socio-cultural framework of the Caribbean', that Elsa Goveia, Professor of History at the University of Jamaica in Mona, read at the 1967 CAM Conference. Reprinted in the *CAM Newsletter*, and later in *Savacou*,⁴⁰ it stood with Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* as a beacon for the movement. Ranging from language to religion and other aspects of Caribbean society, Goveia described a region sharply divided between a minority hegemony, imposed from Europe and North America, and the subordinate majority of its peoples. Democracy with 'one man one vote' had given the black peoples the opportunity to take over responsible power. But the deeply ingrained colonial mentality had preserved a system in which a wealthy and usually light-skinned minority still governed the predominantly poor and dark-skinned masses. Moreover, the integration and stability of the region was based on this mutual acceptance of a social inequality based on wealth and colour. Goveia continued:

Now this is the framework within which Caribbean artists have to operate, and it seems to me that they have a vested interest in ensuring that the system of race and of wealth classification in the West Indies should be abandoned at the earliest possible time. I am not suggesting that the writers need to be politicians though I believe that some of them are. But the fact is that unless the writer throws his weight on the side of the democratisation of West Indian society he is unlikely ever to be able to find a way of living in his own society.⁴¹

Writers and artists in the Caribbean and the Guyanas between the 1930s and 1960s had already played a part in emancipating their societies from old rankings of inferiority and superiority. They had written without prejudice about the deprived peoples of the region, destroying myths of race, and validating the language of the people. 'The artist cannot afford to isolate himself from the question of how the future is to be formed and what its content is to be.'⁴²

CAM members found Goveia's address, like Brathwaite's privileging of folk culture, hugely liberating. The colonial system had marginalised the Caribbean popular arts as the inferior entertainment of the ignorant: now they took centre stage as having preserved the cultural identity that slavery and its aftermath had tried to suppress. The question of language was central. When I gave a dismal paper to the first CAM Conference, looking at West Indian poetry through the eye of an English academic, it met with short shrift from an audience that included C. L. R. James, Brathwaite and Gordon Rohlehr.⁴³ In comments which were later expanded in an address printed in *Savacou*,⁴⁴ Rohlehr identified a natural poetic idiom belonging to Trinidad speech within the songs of the Trinidad calypsonian Mighty Sparrow.

There is a definite speaking voice behind the lyrics. One doesn't feel that language is being coerced into the rigidity of form, but the language is alive and fluid as it plays against the necessary strictness of the music ... It seems to me that there is in the spoken language of Trinidad a potential for rhythmic organisation, which our poets have not yet discovered or if they have, have not yet exploited ... I feel that just as the calypsonian is able to use speech rhythms in his songs, the poet, working from the opposite direction, may be able to use calypso rhythms in his verse, *and still preserve the* sense of being true to the speaking voice.⁴⁵

If Trinidadians focused on carnival and calypso, Aubrey Williams, from Guyana, was concerned with the aesthetic potential contained within his country's heartland. Williams was a hugely talented painter never given his due by the British art establishment. His art recognised the limitations of high realism. Yet in an address reprinted in *Savacou*, Williams strenuously rejected the idea that his non-figurative painting was in any way 'abstract', declaring 'I am not very sure that I understand the meaning of the word'.⁴⁶ If his art appeared non-representational, it was because certain mental preconceptions blinded Western viewers. What Williams painted was a reality, located in native Guyanese traditions, shared by artists and the Guyanese villagers, who journeyed by dray cart to Georgetown to see his paintings.

Ours is a beautiful landscape; unbelievably beautiful in some cases; but, as compared with the ordered landscape in the countries that have been

THE CARIBBEAN ARTISTS MOVEMENT

over-lived in, bizarre, unreal, incongruous. It is a very strong landscape, and the primitive art that came out of this landscape remains unique. We should be proud of our non-configuration. We should be proud of the essences of human existence that the people from that neck of the woods have produced.⁴⁷

Aubrey Williams was an enthusiastic and effective supporter of CAM. Yet he believed that Brathwaite's search for an African cultural perspective could be as exclusive as a European one. Rather than deny any strand in the region's historical heritage Williams looked for ways to accept and transcend it. This approach had been developed by Wilson Harris, who also came from Guyana. Harris's revolutionary views were circulated before the inception of CAM in a 1965 pamphlet, *Tradition and the West Indian Novel*. Harris's essay, republished by La Rose as one of the first New Beacon titles, formed an important background to CAM's discussions and was reinforced by his impressive address to the second CAM conference.⁴⁸ Harris saw that its history gave the Caribbean region a unique complexity. Yet, paradoxically, as a cultural area it was extraordinarily open, for its fragmentation and natural environment had kept it free from the monolithic constraints of the Old World. Where traditional societies were imprisoned in predictive structures of identity and values, the Caribbean offered unique possibilities for imaginative transcendence.

What in my view is remarkable about the West Indian in depth is a sense of subtle links, the series of subtle and nebulous links, which are latent within him, the latent ground of old and new personalities. This is a very difficult view to hold, I grant, because it is not a view which consolidates, which invests in any way in the consolidation of popular character. Rather it seeks to visualise the *fulfilment* of character. Something which is more extraordinary than one can easily imagine.⁴⁹

If Brathwaite provided the driving force of CAM, Harris expressed its unifying concerns, aspirations defined in the introduction James wrote to Harris's 1965 essay:

[West Indian] identity conceals rather or rather constricts an enormous potentiality. We have a history, we don't know it, and we will never know it until we respect ourselves, and relate our present, our past and our future. On this interrelation, Harris is very strong and very clear.⁵⁰

As a Caribbean movement, CAM's discussions revealed the region's diversity as much they did as its coherence. As we have seen, Jamaicans tended to focus on folk language and culture, Trinidadians on carnival and calypso, while Guyanese like Harris and Williams contemplated the psychic spaces of the South American interior. There were also

omissions. There was little about the East Indians of the Caribbean, although it was a personal refusal to be part of a Caribbean 'movement', rather than Indian ethnicity, that kept V. S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon out of CAM. Similarly those representing the light-skinned Caribbean creoles, including John Hearne,⁵¹ and – as is discussed elsewhere in this volume, Jean Rhys⁵² – tended to be excluded. The earlier CAM discussions reflected a male dominance until in 1970 Merle Hodge's *Crick-Crack Monkey* opened a flood of women's writing. CAM responded in 1977 with a special women's issue of *Savacou*, which began by acknowledging the pioneering achievement of Una Marson.⁵³

Kenneth Ramchand once protested⁵⁴ that CAM was a contradiction, a movement devoted to Caribbean roots, but located in London. For CAM's formative years, in the late 1960s, this was largely true. Until CAM in effect moved with Brathwaite to Jamaica, and published original Caribbean writing in *Savacou*, writers and artists based in the West Indies including Derek Walcott, Mervyn Morris, Eric Roach, Denis Scott and Martin Carter, featured little in CAM's debates. Nevertheless CAM's discussions in London were moving in parallel with cultural developments in the Caribbean. Carifesta, the first Pan-Caribbean Festival of the Arts, was conceived independently of CAM. Yet Brathwaite and other CAM members took an active part in the triumphant Festival when it was held in Guyana in 1972. As a celebration of the region's cultural creativity, Carifesta can be seen as CAM's fragmented vision coming together in the Caribbean. This was followed by the following cultural festivals, whose importance went largely unnoticed in Britain, held in Jamaica (1976), Cuba (1979), Barbados (1981) and Trinidad (1992). CAM members, and Brathwaite in particular, also became associated with the highly influential activities of the Casa de las Américas in Cuba.

In Britain CAM has had a lasting impact. The New Beacon Books enterprise of John La Rose and Sarah White, closely linked to CAM, marked the beginning of independent Caribbean publishing and book-selling in Britain, and its success prompted Bogle L'Ouverture, Race Today Publications, and other ventures in community publishing. Besides reprinting important texts that otherwise would have remained in obscurity, New Beacon went on to publish works specifically for Caribbean readers such as Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa will Soon Come Home* (1980). From 1982, New Beacon organised the annual International Book Fair of Radical and Third World Books in London with its lectures and public readings. CAM's activities alerted British publishers to the growing market for Third World texts. James Currey, who was editing Heinemann's African Writers Series, attended the first CAM Conference, and his experience there encouraged him to found a Caribbean Writers Series. Anne Walmsley of Longmans, who became a

keen supporter and the chronicler of CAM, in 1968 brought out her fine anthology of Caribbean verse for schools, *The Sun's Eye*.

CAM drew in interested teachers and educational publishers, becoming a pervasive influence on schools and universities. Its work encouraged the teaching of Caribbean literature at the universities of Sussex and at Kent; at Kent in 1975 the Faculty of Humanities launched the world's first honours degree in English with African and Caribbean Studies. This included a course entirely devoted to Caribbean writing. At a subsequent conference at Kent in 1978, past CAM members founded the Association of Teachers in Caribbean and African Literatures (soon extended to include Asian material). ATCAL published booklets on Third World literatures for schoolteachers, lobbied for such texts to be accepted by British Schools Examination Boards, and published the journal *Wasafiri*, which still continues. In the Caribbean, Kenneth Ramchand and Gordon Rohlehr, both CAM activists, introduced Caribbean literature into the UWI syllabuses at Mona and St Augustine, Trinidad, and encouraged its teaching in local secondary schools. In Kenya, Ngugi's experience of CAM was translated into the indigenisation of literature teaching at the University of Nairobi.

CAM's influence was also felt in the visual arts. Urged on by Brathwaite, it promoted exhibitions of Caribbean visual arts. The first was of 'New art and sculpture', hung in June 1967 with the blessing of Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. CAM promoted some eleven exhibitions, culminating in shows at the House of Commons and at the Commonwealth Institute.⁵⁵ Besides presenting work by recognised artists like Aubrey Williams and Ronald Moody, these included relative newcomers like Errol Lloyd, Karl Craig and Althea McNeish. CAM engagement with theatre involved Evan Jones, a founder member, Marina Maxwell, Lloyd Reckord, Pearl Connor, Marina Maxwell and Ram John Holder in its discussions. But its most pervasive influence will remain hidden, the encouragement it gave to young artists, writers, performers and teachers. CAM meetings offered opportunities to meet Caribbean personalities. John La Rose at New Beacon Books gave advice and opened fresh fields of reading. In different ways, CAM touched the lives of a whole generation of young talent, including James Berry, Faustin Charles, Sebastian Clarke (Amon Saba Sekaana) and, most importantly, Linton Kwesi Johnson.

What did CAM have to offer a white English academic? Speaking for myself, to some CAM members I was always to be in some ways an outsider, separated by history, race, language and my Oxford education. Yet also, and often to the same people, I was also an 'insider', sharing common humanistic concerns, imaginative insights, and a belief in the central importance of the creative arts. I learnt much about Caribbean

culture, and perhaps even more about European civilisation and my place within it – an uncomfortable knowledge. In the end, however, I gained something other than simple understanding of either the Caribbean or Britain. This essay began with a quotation from C. L. R. James's CAM address. Let another from the same paper close it.

It is when you are outside, but can take part as a member, that you see differently from the ways that they see, and you are able to write independently.⁵⁶

Notes

- 1 C. L. R. James, 'Discovering literature in Trinidad: the nineteen-thirties', *Savacou*, 2 (1970), pp. 54–5.
- 2 Edward Brathwaite, 'Timehri', *Savacou*, 2 (1970), p. 37.
- 3 Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966–1972* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1992).
- 4 See Erna Brodber, 'Fiction in the scientific procedure', in Selwyn R. Cudjoe (ed.), *Caribbean Women Writers* (Wellesley, Mass: Calaloux Publications, 1990), pp. 164–8. Brodber used her sociological research to write her innovative novels, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon come Home* (1980) and *Myal* (1988).
- 5 See Frederic G. Cassidy, *Jamaica Talk* (London: Macmillan, 1961).
- 6 On Bill Carr, see Matthew Carr, *My Father's House* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998).
- 7 George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), p. 19.
- 8 Louis James, 'Commonwealth literature studies, where do we stand?', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 11:3 & 4 (1965), p. 72. In 1970 the ACLALS triennial Conference was held at Mona; on this occasion, Brathwaite challenged the concept of Caribbean writing as part of Commonwealth studies.
- 9 The basis of Brathwaite's thesis, later published as *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1971).
- 10 John La Rose, 'Kamau Brathwaite: a heartfelt memoir', in Timothy J. Reiss (ed.), *For the Geography of a Soul* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2001), p. 88.
- 11 See Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists Movement*, pp. 261–6.
- 12 *Savacou*, 9/10 (1974). My thanks to Ian Diefenthaler for this point.
- 13 Major sources of information on Kamau Brathwaite's life and work include: Stewart Brown (ed.), *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1955); Djelal Kadir (ed.), *World Literature Today*, 68.4, special issue on Brathwaite (1994); Kamau Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems* (New York and Mona: Savacou North, 1994); Reiss, *Geography of a Soul*, contains a full bibliography.
- 14 Gordon Rohlehr, *Pathfinder* (Tunapuna, Trinidad: privately published, 1981), p. 5; Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems*, pp. 35–7.
- 15 Brathwaite, 'Timehri', p. 37.
- 16 Brathwaite, 'Timehri', p. 71.
- 17 Kamau Brathwaite, *The Zea Mexican Diary* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 191.
- 18 Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems*, pp. 69–70.
- 19 Brathwaite, 'Timehri', p. 37.
- 20 See Bridget Jones, '"The unity is submarine": aspects of a Pan-Caribbean consciousness in the work of Kamau Brathwaite', in Brown, *Brathwaite*, pp. 86–100.
- 21 Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems*, pp. 236–40.
- 22 Brathwaite's lecture 'Jazz and West Indian Novel' was from the essays published in *Bim*, 11:44 (1967); 12:45 (1967); 12:46 (1968); and republished in Kamau Brathwaite,

THE CARIBBEAN ARTISTS MOVEMENT

- Roots* (Havana: Ediciones Casa de las Américas, 1993; and reprinted Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). I quote from the Ann Arbor edition.
- 23 Brathwaite, *Roots*, p. 72.
 - 24 Brathwaite, *Roots*, p. 58.
 - 25 Brathwaite, *Roots*, p. 65.
 - 26 Kamau Brathwaite, *Rights of Passage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 3.
 - 27 Roxy Harris and Sarah White (eds), *Foundations of a Movement. A Tribute to John La Rose* (London: John La Rose Tribute Committee, 1991) assembles an impressive range of contributors witnessing to the many aspects of La Rose's life and work.
 - 28 See Raymondo Quevedo, *Atilla's Kaiso: a short history of Trinidad calypso* (St Augustine, Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1983).
 - 29 Andrew Salkey (ed.), *West Indian Stories* (London: Faber, 1960); Salkey, *Stories from the Caribbean* (London: Elek, 1965); Salkey, *Breaklight* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971).
 - 30 Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists Movement*, pp. 91–3.
 - 31 Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (London: Longman Caribbean, 1975).
 - 32 Edward Brathwaite, *Islands* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 113. For Brathwaite's rejection of 'cultural schizophrenia' see Glyne A. Griffith, 'Kamau Brathwaite as cultural critic', in Brown, *Brathwaite*, pp. 75–85.
 - 33 A paper given to the ACALAS Conference in Jamaica, 1970. It was not, I think, ever published.
 - 34 Louis James, *The Islands in Between* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 23.
 - 35 'Yoh gwine kill dialect!' – see Louise Bennett, 'Ban's o' Killing', in her *Jamaica Labrish* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966), pp. 218–19.
 - 36 Sylvia Wynter, 'Reflections on West Indian criticism', *Jamaica Journal* (1968), pp. 23–32, reprinted in John Hearne (ed.), *Carifesta Forum* (Jamaica: Carifesta 76, 1976), pp. 129–38; and Edward Baugh (ed.), *Critics on Caribbean Literature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978), pp. 19–23.
 - 37 Wynter, 'Reflections', in *Carifesta Forum*, pp. 134–5.
 - 38 Edward Brathwaite, 'Caribbean critics', *New World Quarterly*, 5:1 & 2 (1969), pp. 264–72.
 - 39 See Brathwaite, 'The African presence in Caribbean literature', in *Roots*, pp. 190–258.
 - 40 Elsa Goveia, 'The social framework', *Savacou*, 2 (1970), pp. 7–15.
 - 41 Goveia, 'Social framework', p. 13.
 - 42 Goveia, 'Social framework', p. 14.
 - 43 My talk was later printed, heavily revised, as 'Caribbean poetry in English: some problems', in *Savacou*, 2 (1970), pp. 78–86.
 - 44 See CAM *Newsletter*, nos 2–4; Gordon Rohlehr, 'Sparrow and the language of Calypso', *Savacou*, 2 (1970), p. 99; and Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (Tunapuna: privately printed, 1990).
 - 45 Rohlehr, 'Sparrow', p. 99.
 - 46 Aubrey Williams, 'The artist in the Caribbean', *Savacou*, 2 (1970), pp. 16–18.
 - 47 Williams, 'The artist', p. 17.
 - 48 Wilson Harris, with an introduction by C. L. R. James, *Tradition and the West Indian Novel* (London: West Indian Students Union, 1965); and Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1967).
 - 49 Harris, *Tradition and the West Indian Novel*, p. 7.
 - 50 Harris, *Tradition and the West Indian Novel*, p. 5.
 - 51 Hearne was involved in one stormy CAM meeting. See Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists Movement*, pp. 78–9.
 - 52 See Helen Carr's chapter in this volume.
 - 53 Special women's issue: *Savacou*, 13 (1977).
 - 54 Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists Movement*, pp. 53–4.
 - 55 These are listed in Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists Movement*, pp. 326–7.
 - 56 James, 'Discovering literature', p. 60.