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# Thinking Black: Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* and the Politics of Writing Black British History in the 1980s

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Thirty-two years ago Pluto Press published Peter Fryer's landmark study of black British history, *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain*. The book was widely praised at the time of publication for its historical reach and magisterial prose, and it has remained a foundational text of black British history. Republished in 2010 with a new introduction by Paul Gilroy, it has been a staple on the shelves of radical and mainstream bookshops in the past few years, and has enjoyed a second life revived by the exhibitions held under its title at the Black Cultural Archives and the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2015.<sup>1</sup> In 1984 when Pluto first published *Staying Power* Salman Rushdie called the book 'invaluable', Buchi Emecheta named it 'courageous', and A. Sivanandan welcomed it for providing 'a veritable arsenal of weaponry against white historiography'.<sup>2</sup> In the mid 1980s, to publish a historical study of black settlement in Britain was to enter a fully charged political field. For Fryer, a white writer, this was all the more so. Returning to the book today, its courage and clarity are still vibrant. While the long history of black life in Britain is perhaps better known than it was in the 1980s, such gains are still precarious – subject, in part, to the whim of education secretaries, television commissioners and museum curators. However, much has changed in the thirty years since *Staying Power* was first published. It is unlikely that a similar book would be written today: its political investments connect to a world that has now passed. In this article I want to resituate Fryer's *Staying Power* in the contexts of 1980s white racism, black radicalism, and new-left politics, to show how this foundational text in our field was organized around Fryer's understanding of the imperative of 'thinking black', and to locate it within a transnational formation of radical blackness some distance from the political formations of other radical historians active at the time.

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in defining the work of radical history. The writings of earlier radical historians in Britain have received renewed attention, while several conferences have also aimed at a broader state-of-the-discipline critique from a

radical and left perspective.<sup>3</sup> The turning points in the postwar renaissance of radical history in Britain are well rehearsed: the Soviet invasion of Hungary and British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956, the National Women's Liberation Movement Conference at Ruskin College in 1970, and the various 'turns' of the 1980s. Questions of race, however, remain marginal to this story. Paul Gilroy's critique of ethnic absolutism in the work of Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm is still justly famous. More recently, comments by Stuart Hall also suggested the apparent difficulty for Thompson and other new-left thinkers of his generation to conceive the significance and transformatory potential of Britain's growing black presence.<sup>4</sup> If radical historians on the British left – slowly, unevenly – have since begun to engage with black radical thinking, and to situate race as a key factor in the development of Britain as an imperial and postimperial formation, it is from substantially beyond the familiar array of new-left historiographical institutions that the driving force of this transformation began. Tracing the history of Fryer's *Staying Power* offers us an alternative periodization of British radical histories which takes us through some of these other sites of historical work and intellectual production.

Peter Fryer was also formed in the politics of 1956. A scholarship boy, born in Hull in 1927 and educated at Hymer's College, Fryer was engaged in Communist politics from a young age. He joined the Young Communists in 1942, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1945, and the *Daily Worker* in 1948, where one of his first assignments as a young journalist was to cover the arrival of Empire Windrush at Tilbury.<sup>5</sup> He resigned from the *Daily Worker* eight years later when, after visiting Hungary to report on the 1956 uprising, he refused to publish the party line. Instead, he wrote *Hungarian Tragedy* (1956) a powerful critique of Soviet 'tyranny' that was to play a key role in the CPGB's fierce internal discussions.<sup>6</sup> After 1956, like so many British communists, Fryer broke with the Communist Party. However, while the new-left formation to emerge after 1956 was defined by the range of its social concerns and libertarian alliances, Fryer found himself, by various turns, aligned with Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League (SLL) and editing the increasingly hard-line Trotskyist *Newsletter* and *Labour Review*, before quitting Healy's company in 1959. Despite his short association with Healy, Fryer was not one for dogmatism, and he became inspired by the variety and scope of social upheavals taking place around him in the 1960s – upheavals which embraced a democratic spirit often a substantive distance from Healy's SLL. In the 1960s, Fryer published on topics as diverse as the omission of sexological and erotic works from the British Library catalogue, the Obscene Publications Act, London's sixties counter-culture, English prudery, and the history of contraception.<sup>7</sup> An enduring

passion, though, was African diasporic music. An aficionado, Fryer was an accomplished jazz pianist, and was renowned for his knowledge of African, African American, African Caribbean and African Latin American music. In the late 1970s he produced a series of music documentaries on BBC Radio 3. And in 1981, at a historic conference on black British history at the Institute of Education, Fryer spoke on musicians, intending to expand his paper into a history of black musicians in Britain.<sup>8</sup> Instead he started work on *Staying Power* soon after. *Staying Power* was not the first history of black Britain to be published, but it was the first to take an avowedly political stand, and to argue for this history as crucial to the crises of its contemporary moment. The book's politics drew on a tradition of black radical writing reaching its high point in Britain in the early 1980s. At its heart was the injunction, variously understood, to 'think black'. It was here that Fryer began.

### THINKING BLACK

At every public engagement where he spoke on black history, Fryer would confront his position as a white writer. He felt this to be an obligation, and certainly it was something that he would frequently face questions on from his audiences. His answer was invariably the same. Acknowledging how much this question of white writers and black history had animated debate in the United States of America, he would draw on two prominent African American historians to back his position. First, he would quote Benjamin Quarles:

Black history ... is no longer a matter of limited concern. Whites need to know black history. ... For whites it furnishes a new version of American history, one that especially challenges our national sense of smugness and self-righteousness.

Next, citing Earl E. Thorpe, he would propose that 'it is accepted that white writers who make the effort to "think black" – i.e. to grasp imaginatively as well as intellectually the essence of black historical experience – may have something worthwhile to offer'.<sup>9</sup> 'Thinking black', for Fryer, was a radical position. Indeed, he would propose that he wrote *Staying Power* 'as a militant'. 'It was meant', he said, 'to be a weapon.'<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Quarles, whose writings on black history Fryer drew upon, was not known as a radical figure in his US context. Indeed, though in the work that Fryer cited Quarles did make a rare endorsement some of the intellectual and methodological approaches which he ascribed to revolutionary black nationalism, he remained critical of what he viewed as a separatist and divisive politics emerging out of the Black Power end of black studies. In the essay from which Fryer drew,

written in 1971 at the height of the confrontational politics of the Black Power movement, Quarles appealed to black history in conciliatory vein as ‘a balm to make the wounded whole’.<sup>11</sup> Earl E. Thorpe, however, also writing in 1971, endorsed black history in terms far closer to Fryer’s as ‘a weapon in the fight for racial equality’.<sup>12</sup>

Thorpe’s injunction to ‘think black’ drew directly on the inheritance of US Black Power. This formulation, common in the diverse languages of black radicalism flourishing through the late 1960s to the early 1980s across the black Atlantic world, worked through many different articulations.<sup>13</sup> In Thorpe’s usage, ‘thinking black’ as a historian stood uneasily between two poles. On the one hand, Thorpe condemned what he termed the ‘semi-privileged’ African American historians, and here he included E. Franklin Frazier and Nathan Hare who, he argued, ‘think white instead of black ... they over-value Europe and whiteness and denigrate Africa and blackness’. On the other hand, however, Thorpe’s own work mobilized a language of racial uplift which recalled some of those black intellectual traditions of the post-Reconstruction South mapped by Kevin Gaines. This tradition of racial uplift would itself be censured as a form of thinking white in the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Power movement articulated by thinkers such as Huey P. Newton or Bobby Seale.<sup>14</sup> Despite Fryer’s overtures to Thorpe and Quarles, both were significantly at odds with the meanings invested in ‘thinking black’ in his own work. Fryer, like Thorpe, was writing under the inheritance of Black Power. However, to understand Fryer’s thinking black, we need to consider this Black Power history through its co-ordinates on the British radical left.

*Staying Power* was written in response to the urban uprisings of the early 1980s. In the book’s preface, Fryer recalls that it was ‘a chance remark by Bob Supiya of the British Library during the 1981 “riots” that finally led me to lay aside other work and start writing this book instead’.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, he recounted discussions of the uprisings round the dinner table with his children, in which they implored him to write ‘something about black history’.<sup>16</sup> This was the era of the National Front, who though declining as a political force by 1981 had left an indelible mark on British politics and, with Enoch Powell, had firmly placed repatriation at the heart of political debate around immigration and race.<sup>17</sup> The British Nationality Act of 1981 and the New Cross Massacre of the same year further confirmed, for many, the state of siege under which many black Britons continued to live. In this context, the assertion of *longevity* was in itself an act of defiance against the politics of repatriation: black people in Britain had *staying power*. Or, as a popular chant at the Black Peoples’ Day of Action in 1981 went: ‘Come What May, We’re Here To Stay’.<sup>18</sup> Another quotation from *Staying Power* which Fryer would repeat when emphasizing this point was taken from the

Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' publication, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982). '[T]races of black life', the authors claimed, 'have been removed from the British past to ensure that blacks are not part of the British future.'<sup>19</sup> Each careful account of a black soldier, drummer, jester or musician in Fryer's book is a riposte to this politics of repatriation. At a time when, as Patrick Wright observed, the articulation of English identity was steeped in reveries of living in an old country, Fryer's history aimed to unsettle the racial assumptions of those sites where Englishness was most heavily invested. Africans were in England, he tells us, 'before we had potatoes, or tobacco, or tea, ... before Shakespeare was born'.<sup>20</sup> Inasmuch as this constituted a politics of blackness, blackness in Britain here was sheer ontological *presence*: an accumulation of detail, and sometimes even just of dates, a recording of one after another person of African or South Asian descent in Britain. This is a politics which inhabits the book from its opening line: 'There were Africans in Britain before the English came here'.<sup>21</sup>

To borrow Hannah Ishmael's description of the origins of the Black Cultural Archives, founded in the wake of the Brixton uprisings of 1981, we can understand *Staying Power* here as produced through 'the convergence of the politics of race and the politics of heritage'.<sup>22</sup> The 1980s heritage boom was not limited to white Britain. The same year that Len Garrison founded the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee's *Roots in Britain* exhibition at Brent Library attempted to trace the long historical presence of people of African and Asian descent in Britain.<sup>23</sup> Local history associations in Birmingham, Haringey, Liverpool and Southampton also began research projects on the histories of local black populations in the early 1980s.<sup>24</sup> However, there was more to the politics of Fryer's book than just a challenge to the repatriation politics of the right through an emergent counter-politics of black British heritage. While the heritage industry described by Patrick Wright may have existed often as an investment in little England conservatism, Fryer's book was conceived as a 'militant' intervention. His project carried particular hopes for the future which were invested in his understanding of blackness and in his left politics. Alongside what we must acknowledge as an ontologically unstable definition, implicit in Fryer's book, of blackness as an African or South Asian inheritance, was an understanding of blackness *as* politics.

## RADICAL HISTORIES

When challenged on his decision to include those of both African and South Asian descent in his definition of black Britain, Fryer argued that importantly, 'methodologically from the

point of view of the history itself, if you go back to the seventeenth century, those pageant performers, you cannot tell very often whether they were Asians or Africans'. This initial explanation stayed close to the ontological distinction which underpinned Fryer's other attempts to catalogue, or at least signal, simply as much and as broad a non-white presence as space and resources would permit. But bringing the discussion back to the present, he also argued that 'young Asians in Britain are increasingly coming to accept and adopt for themselves the political label black'.<sup>25</sup> In this, Fryer signalled his understanding of blackness as a historical product, and one produced, or certainly very much in the process of renegotiation, in his own contemporary moment.

It is worth, at this point, considering whom Fryer was reading, and with whom he was talking, as he researched and wrote this book. There are several important names in Fryer's acknowledgements, but two in particular merit further discussion: Paul Gilroy and A. Sivanandan.<sup>26</sup> Gilroy at this time wrote frequently for the two foremost journals to emerge out of British Black Power politics in the 1970s, *Race & Class* and *Race Today*; he had long been involved with Rock Against Racism; and he was in frequent dialogue with a circle of black radical intellectuals not mentioned so much these days, but who at the time were leading theorists of and activists in black radical politics. These included Ricky Cambridge and Cecil Gutzmore of *Black Liberator*, Darcus Howe and John La Rose of *Race Today*, and Colin Prescod and, of course, Sivanandan, of *Race & Class*.<sup>27</sup> Gilroy was a founding member in 1984 of a short-lived but fascinating journal – very much of its time – called *Emergency*, and he was midway through the early phase of his career in which we can identify his work as most clearly marked by a Jamesian investment in what Gilroy, reviewing C. L. R. James's *At the Rendezvous of Victory* in 1984, called 'the movements of the great mass of the population'.<sup>28</sup> Sivanandan, as Chair of the Institute of Race Relations, had been the driving force behind the journal *Race & Class*, in 1984 entering its tenth year. Introducing Sivanandan's 1982 classic *A Different Hunger?*, Stuart Hall credited him as 'one of the handful of key black intellectuals who has actively sustained the black struggle in Britain over more than two decades'.<sup>29</sup> The Institute of Race Relations, under Sivanandan, was a hub of radical activity, frequented by many of the black radical activists and intellectuals in London in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>30</sup> The Institute, also, was thanked in Fryer's acknowledgements, and the influence of Gilroy and Sivanandan is evident in Fryer's book, especially in the final chapters. Gilroy read the drafts of the final two chapters and offered commentary, and his work is cited in Fryer's footnotes; Sivanandan's work, too, is frequently

referenced, and indeed becomes Fryer's main source for recounting institutional racism in the police and justice systems in his final pages.<sup>31</sup>

Just as for Earl E. Thorpe blackness as an ontological presence required an epistemological category – 'thinking black' – so too for these intellectuals and the radical black formations of which they were a part. We can see this in the histories they produced. In the aftermath of the uprisings of 1980 and 1981, there were several attempts to narrate a black historical presence in Britain. Academic texts on black British history were of course in existence before the uprisings, most notably James Walvin's *Black and White: the Negro in English Society, 1555–1945* (1973) and Folarin Shyllon's *Black People in Britain, 1555–1833* (1974). In 1984, however, Sivanandan condemned these as, respectively, 'historicist and white' and 'worthy' but 'flat'.<sup>32</sup> Fryer shared the sense that black history needed to be thought about and written in a new way. He spoke of the International Conference on the History of Blacks in Britain, held by the University of Edinburgh and the Institute of Education in 1981, as 'in many ways so-whattish on the militant sort of side of this'.<sup>33</sup> To produce a *black* history of black Britain, for Fryer as much as for Sivanandan, meant to produce a militant history. Thinking black was equated here with radical thinking, understood pre-eminently in a left-libertarian frame.

Militant histories of black Britain were indeed being produced across the black radical press. From 1981 to 1984 *Black Voice*, the newspaper of the Black Unity and Freedom Party, ran a nine-part history of blacks in Britain from 1500 to the 1980s.<sup>34</sup> In *Race Today* between 1980 and 1982 Darcus Howe presented a three-part history of black struggles against the police since the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> And in *Race & Class* Sivanandan published his much-cited 'From Resistance to Rebellion', charting black struggles in Britain from 1940 to the present day in 1981.<sup>36</sup> *Blacks Britannica*, A short documentary by the American film-maker David Koff, assisted by the Institute of Race Relations's Colin Prescod and detailing black struggles against the state in the 1960s and seventies was produced a couple of years before the uprisings, in 1978, but received its widest circulation post-1981.<sup>37</sup> In 1982, Prescod also produced a series of programmes for Channel Four, documenting black political struggles in Britain from the nineteenth century to the present.<sup>38</sup> Through the supplementary school movement many black intellectuals also promoted such histories, and developed them as teaching tools.<sup>39</sup>

Uniting these many retellings of black British history emerging in this moment was a conviction that a properly *black* black history was a history of suffering and, importantly, of resistance. So if one famous chant of the 1981 Black People's Day of Action – 'Come What



May We're Here to Stay' – captures some of the politics that Fryer's book engaged as he emphasized the *staying power* of Britain's black settlers, the other popular call of the day – 'Here to Stay, Here to Fight' – reveals the character of that tenure as it was understood by many of those on the black radical left. The rebellion of black youth in the uprisings of the early 1980s, as well as the repeated battles between black youth and police which had occurred at the Notting Hill Carnival since the mid seventies, were often invested with radical potential. In Gilroy's reflections on the 1981 riots, in an essay cited by Fryer, he celebrated the 'accumulated histories of their far-flung resistance' which he proposed Britain's black populations had brought with them. These were 'black relics of a distant colonial engagement' which, he suggested, had 'brought a distinct quality to class struggles in their new metropolitan home'.<sup>40</sup> In a reflection on the confrontation between black youth and the police in 'Brixton ... Toxteth [and] Southall' in Gilroy's journal *Emergency*, Cedric Robinson, in a similar vein, would publish a lengthy discussion of what he termed the 'collective resistance[s] which together constitute an inventory of possibilities for the present and future generations of Blacks in Britain'.<sup>41</sup> In recognition of this 'historical record of Black collective resistance', Robinson wrote, 'it will be increasingly difficult for Black people in the Western metropolises to ... delude ourselves that we have no *special historical part* in the ending of these horrors'.<sup>42</sup> For Robinson, it was this inventory of struggle by black people that constituted their blackness. 'This is our legacy whether we want it or not. ... We will be Black not because we are not white, but because of our history and the achievements of our struggle.'<sup>43</sup>

### THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Paul Gilroy, in his recent introduction to *Staying Power*, has noted how far we must recognize in Fryer's work an underlying faith that 'there was no significant sense in which the problems created by racial hierarchy could not be solved by the overthrow of capitalism'.<sup>44</sup> In his belief that the wrongs of racism and colonialism were best undone through ending capitalism, Fryer was on common ground with many of the intellectual new left of his generation. However, what bound him closer, in this analysis, to black radicalism on the left was his belief that, first, to understand capitalism in British history *required* looking at the history of colonialism, slavery and racism and, second, that the project for the overthrow of capitalism came substantially *through* resistances to colonialism, slavery and racism. This understanding of race, capitalism and resistance first emerges in Fryer's discussion of abolitionism. His understanding of abolitionism was informed by a social

history perspective which privileged social movements, popular politics, and individual acts of resistance, most notably in his repeated emphasis on the importance of slaves running away to achieve their own liberty. A proper understanding of emancipation, Fryer insisted, was ‘a matter of social rather than legal history’.<sup>45</sup> While his argument on the driving forces behind abolition worked in part by reference to the traditions of English radicalism of E. P. Thompson’s eighteenth-century working class, it was through C. L. R. James that Fryer claimed the political importance of the actions of the mass of the enslaved black population.<sup>46</sup> ‘Individual acts of resistance’, Fryer proposed, ‘multiplied many times over, became self-emancipation: a gradual, cumulative, and irreversible achievement which constituted the first victory of the abolitionist movement in Britain’.<sup>47</sup> In a series of lectures delivered in the early nineties, Fryer returned to this theme. Recommending James’s *Black Jacobins* (1938), he argued that its central virtue was ‘in what it has to teach us about the role of the masses in history and about what happens when they erupt on the historical scene’.<sup>48</sup>

It was in social history that Fryer’s investments laid. As he considered the history of working-class radicalism in nineteenth century Britain, Fryer argued for the importance, in this narrative, of black radical leaders.<sup>49</sup> However, his most significant development of this argument came when he expanded it into his wider understanding of what we might term ‘black’ social history. Reminding his readers that he had focused, predominantly, on the public ‘fighting figures’ – William Davidson, Robert Wedderburn, William Cuffay – Fryer suggested that, in fact, ‘fighting’ was a logical historical disposition of blackness. ‘Daily experience’, he tells us, ‘knocked into black people the art of self-defence, with brains for choice, with fists or other weapons as a last resort. To be a radical or a boxer was merely to apply, at a public level, a lesson transmitted by oral tradition and reinforced on the street every day of one’s life.’<sup>50</sup> In a historical imagination in which racism, colonialism and capitalism were bound together to such an extent that, for Fryer, to talk of one was necessarily to talk of the others, the logic of this position transmuted into a suggestion that to challenge one was also, necessarily, to challenge the others. The direction of this challenge would come from those on the brunt of all fronts: from poor blacks.

This was the logic at play in Fryer’s decision to name one of his central chapters, charting black life in Britain from 1830 to 1918, ‘Challenges to Empire’. Of the historical actors covered by this chapter, he suggested that ‘[w]hat these people had in common gives this chapter its title. All of them, in one way or another, to some degree or other, challenged empire or – it came to much the same thing – challenged racism. A black person leading any kind of public life could hardly help doing so’.<sup>51</sup> Such claims are less stridently made by

postcolonial historians today. One cannot deny that race, nation and empire were central to modern British history, nor, indeed, that as conceptual categories the three were not in some sense ‘fused together’.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, in Fryer’s formulation the collapsing together of anti-racism, anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism appears too neat. It leaves insufficient space for the extent to which, as Anne Spry Rush has recently argued, challenges to race and racism could often work *within* an overarching commitment to an imperial vision, or indeed anti-colonialism and anti-racism could often, and often unwittingly, work to repeat dominant racial imaginaries.<sup>53</sup> While Fryer’s account of Chartist leader William Cuffay, for example, may have fitted his argument quite comfortably, there are many far less comfortable fits. His account of Mary Seacole overlooks her role as an entrepreneur of empire. He equally discounts Olaudah Equiano’s own considerable faith in commerce when he dismisses Equiano’s appeals to the greater prospects for British manufacturing in a world free of the slave trade as ‘shrewdly appealing to capitalist self-interest’. And while he notes that Harold Moody was less ‘militant’ than his Pan Africanist contemporaries, Fryer gives little sense of what Rush has termed Moody’s ‘loyalty to an idealized British empire’.<sup>54</sup>

Fryer’s version of blackness and radicalism also carried a particular gender politics. With the exception of Mary Seacole, women rarely feature in his narrative; his reading of blackness as a street-level, confrontational politics frequently removed black women’s lives from view. If blackness, for radical politics, was identified in Fryer’s moment most prominently with the confrontations in Brixton, Toxteth or Southall, this was a politics for which, as Keith Piper remembers, ‘the Black of resistance and defiance was not only young, but also male’. In this, ‘a large and visible slice of the project of Black political assertion generated within this period became mis-perceived as gendered, and through that misconception, underscored by assumptions of a romanticised machismo’.<sup>55</sup> But while Fryer’s fore-fronting of boxers and ‘radicals’ produced a decidedly masculine history of black resistance such that, as Joan Wallach Scott said of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1963), this was ‘preeminently a story about men’, alternatives did exist.<sup>56</sup> In the same year that *Staying Power* was published, Bristol’s feminist Falling Wall Press republished *The Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), providing a book-length study of a black woman’s transnational life. In their introduction to the book, however, Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee recognized how far Seacole’s ‘prejudices against Native Americans, Greek and Turks’, and her ‘contradictory feelings about her status as a black woman’ made her ‘not an obvious heroine for modern times’.<sup>57</sup> Theirs was a book that was far more comfortable with the contradictions and ambivalence of

black experiences than Fryer's was ready to be: again, this spoke to his particular reading of blackness and its significance for the present conjuncture.

If there was little room for ambiguity and ambivalence in Fryer's narrative, in part this was because his hopes for Britain's future were bound up with his articulation of the black past. 'Without knowing something about black history we can neither understand the world of today nor see the way forward to the world of tomorrow.'<sup>58</sup> In *Staying Power*, these hopes were tied to what Fryer termed the 'rising generation'.<sup>59</sup> But more broadly, this was a hope that remembering blackness as a form of resistance held wider significance for Britain in the present moment. As Fryer wrote in conclusion to his 1989 text *Black People in the British Empire*:

Black people born in Britain are a permanent part of British society. They are here to stay. They will not put up with state racism, police racism, and racist harassment by fascist gangs. With ever-increasing determination they are defending themselves, their children, their homes, and their communities. In this task they have the support of all white people who have begun to understand the painful lessons, the painful truths, taught by black history.<sup>60</sup>

Black history here was not straightforwardly a history of those of non-white descent – even if such a thing *could* be called straightforward. Though Fryer, in his historical writing, did attempt this in part, he was always returning to an understanding of blackness, and a consequent understanding of black history, more closely bound up with his politics.

## CONCLUSION

In an audience at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1984, the Marxist Barbadian poet and Pan Africanist Peter Blackman asked Fryer about his announced forthcoming anthology of black writing in Britain. Would the anthology include V. S. Naipaul? Blackman raised a few laughs, a few sneers; the implication of his question was understood. The question was not whether Naipaul, as an Indo-Trinidadian, could be considered 'black'. It was a question of whether Naipaul's writing, rehashing colonialist stereotypes of Africans and Indians for a predominantly white reading public, could be considered 'black' writing. Fryer dodged the question somewhat by emphasizing that he was still in the early stages of planning this book, but as he elaborated it was clear that, for Fryer, an anthology of black British writing was an anthology of radical politics. 'Because there is a whole long tradition, it now appears,' he

replied, ‘of black participation in and work in and sacrifice for our radical tradition in Britain. So, beginning from there, I want to take extracts from writers from whose work one can gauge something, as the years go by, as the decades go by, of the black experience in Britain.’<sup>61</sup> To gauge something of ‘the black experience in Britain’, once again, was to gauge a radical history; to qualify as black history, it seemed, history had to be radical.

For some, this was a cause of disquiet. Trevor Phillips, reviewing *Staying Power* for *The Times*, complained that

Regrettably, Mr Fryer seems to believe that black lives are only significant when they are the object of, or battling against, racism. There must be a rich vein of material concerned with black culture and everyday life. The focus on instances of individual racism will certainly prick some consciences. But at the same time it will leave a depressingly one-dimensional picture of black life in Britain.<sup>62</sup>

Certainly, Phillips’s complaint held some water. A multicultural drift in music and marriage is a quiet undercurrent to Fryer’s argument, but it is in narrating acts of antiracist resistance that he is most comfortable.<sup>63</sup> Today, there is a critical turn across the humanities towards what John Storey has observed is an increasingly prevalent but largely undefined interest in ‘everyday life’.<sup>64</sup> In its least critical use, this has led to a demand for historical inquiry to look ‘beyond’ politics, to retrieve the ‘ordinary’ from the condescension of the ‘extraordinary’. The apotheosis of such an approach is Dominic Sandbrook’s encyclopaedic attempt to retell British life from the 1950s to the 1970s through a concentration ‘on the millions of ordinary Britons’ and ‘the realities of daily life’, a life of ‘gardening, bowling and fishing [and] holiday[s] to Scarborough and Skegness’ that remained ‘indifferent to the great public affairs of the day’.<sup>65</sup> And yet, if approaches like Sandbrook’s effect too complete a separation of the everyday and the political, Fryer’s approach risked making the everyday visible only when it was interpretable in its race politics.

Complaints like Phillips’s turned on the ambivalence between Fryer’s definition of blackness as a fixed racial ontology and his implicit definition of it as a political process of becoming. The difficulty perhaps resided in the need to recognize that while racial identities, as all identities, were always in process, the process of racial formation also extended beyond racism and antiracism, articulated to any number of complex and often contradictory experiences. And yet, while Fryer’s ambivalent articulation of blackness often left blackness reducible to resistance, *Staying Power* was nonetheless ground-breaking in its insistence that

modern Britain's social, economic and political formations were processes of racial formation, that racial formation and cultures of resistance happened as much in day-to-day life as in organized political activism, and that politics, by consequence, happened in, rather than beyond, the 'everyday'. In this, Fryer drew substantially on a body of thought only marginally present in the the new-left historiographical institutions of the early 1980s. To the extent that *Staying Power* remains one of the key texts of black British history, its location within a wider history of radical blackness reveals alternative routes for the formation of historical knowledge in radical history today.

It is in his investments in blackness as a radical history pointing the way to a radical future that we can most clearly begin to see the distance between Fryer's work and that of his new-left contemporaries, as well as the trajectory of postcolonial and black British historiography in the intervening years to the present. If one takes for comparison the developing trends in new-left social histories of the white English working class, there was a movement from the 1970s to describe not working class radicalism but working class conservatism. Under Gareth Stedman Jones, as David Feldman and Jon Lawrence have noted, the task of left social history became 'to make sense of the cultural and political gulf between E. P. Thompson's early nineteenth-century radical working class ... and Richard Hoggart's conservative, inward-looking, mid-twentieth-century working class of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957)'.<sup>66</sup> There was no inevitability between class and politics in this thinking. And as Margaret Thatcher launched Britain into the Falklands War in 1983 with substantial public support, many more new-left historians would turn to explore the historical lives of working-class conservatism, the most substantial result being Raphael Samuel's three edited volumes on British national identity in 1989.<sup>67</sup> In the early 1980s, though, radicalism and resistance were still the dominant frames through which blackness and black history could be spoken. This is hardly surprising. Clashes between black youth and the police dominated newspaper headlines in this period; the Black Peoples' Day of Action in 1981 was a landmark demonstration of black political power; and uprisings spread across British cities in resistance to heavy policing of black communities in early 1980s. More than this, though, the trajectories of new politics of black revolution born in the years of decolonization, Civil Rights and Black Power were yet to reach their end. While COINTELPRO may have decimated the Black Panther Party in the USA, Black Power uprisings continued across the Caribbean states in the 1970s.<sup>68</sup> It was not until the assassination of Walter Rodney in 1980 and the bitter end to Grenada's New Jewel Movement in 1983 – both events which would significantly affect black radical leaders in Britain – that Black Power as a world-historical

phenomenon really came to an end.<sup>69</sup> This world can appear as the distant past now; in Fryer's *Staying Power*, it is still vibrant.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1 'Staying Power: Photographs of Black British Experience, 1950s–1990s', joint exhibition at the Black Cultural Archives, London, 15 Jan.– 30 June 2015, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 16 Feb.– 15 May 2015.

2 Salman Rushdie, on front cover of Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain*, London, 1984; Buchi Emecheta, 'Willing Hands', *New Society*, 24 May 1984, p. 323; A. Sivanandan, 'Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain. By Peter Fryer', *Race & Class* 26:2, autumn 1984, pp. 98–9. See also Gus John, 'Against All Odds. *Staying Power*, by Peter Fryer', *Race Today Review*, 1985, pp. 45–6; Ben Okri, 'Out of Silence', *New Statesman*, 25 May 1984, p. 26.

3 In these new histories of radical history, founding fathers predominate. Recent works have explored and celebrated the contributions to radical history of Raphael Samuel, E. P. Thompson and Gareth Stedman-Jones, while the passing of Eric Hobsbawm in 2012 and the half centenary of *The Making of the English Working Class* in 2013 also sparked conferences in 2013 and 2014. We are still awaiting comparable volumes and conferences for Catherine Hall, Sally Alexander, Barbara Taylor or Sheila Rowbotham. For published works, see Kynan Gentry, 'Ruskin, Radicalism and Raphael Samuel: Politics, Pedagogy and the Origins of the History Workshop', *History Workshop Journal* 76: 1, autumn 2013, pp. 187–211, and the recent republication of Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, London, 2012; Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, the New Left, and Postwar British Politics*, Manchester, 2011; E. P. Thompson and *English Radicalism*, ed. Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor, Manchester, 2014; and the recent festschrift for Gareth Stedman-Jones: *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History*, ed. David Feldman and John Lawrence, Cambridge, 2011. More widely, see

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Alexander’, Institute of Contemporary Art, 30 May 1984, BL, C95/116. See also Emecheta, ‘Willing Hands’.

10 ‘Peter Fryer in Conversation with Ziggi Alexander’.

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47 *Staying Power*, p. 203.

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