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The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

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Remembering Jamaica

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When Gillian Forrester sent the invitation to speak at the conference she suggested it would be valuable to discuss the legacies of Jamaican slavery in Britain, during the years of *Windrush* and decolonization – encompassing the late 1940s, the 1950s and 1960s. I had two immediate responses. The first was that this was of great interest, even though I had never formulated the issue quite in these terms. The idea of thinking together the conjunction of memories of slavery with the politics of decolonization clearly has much going for it. The second was that I couldn't think, straightaway, of any obvious textual archive – no public political debate, no significant imaginative fiction, no movies, no significant cache of private papers – to which I could immediately turn. Over the following weeks I pondered this further, and spoke with colleagues. It gradually became apparent that there *was* no extensive known archive which could shed light on this, save for the occasional fragments. The question that Gillian posed is powerfully a question of our time, and not one which was a preoccupation of postwar Britain. As we shall see, this situation contrasts dramatically with the story that Catherine Hall will tell about the dispositions of memory in the UK -- the ambiguities notwithstanding -- which have characterized the current bicentennial in 2007 of the abolition of the slave trade. And too it contrasts vividly with the historical reconstruction she offers in *Civilizing Subjects*, which addressed the middle decades of the nineteenth century, from Emancipation to Governor Eyre.

The absence, or invisibility, of explicit debate about the Jamaican slave past in Britain in these years, though, may yet be revealing. If I'm right in my reading it raises two questions, one methodological and conceptual, the other historical, though each is connected to the other.

Methodologically: we know that memory can only work in conjunction with forgetting. They, memory and forgetting, are not so much different mental operations as aspects of a single process. Memory is organized by what has been forgotten, and how it has been forgotten. Forgetfulness itself can refer to many different historical phenomena. For our purposes here we might suggest that forgetfulness derives from a social sanction about speaking out about the slave past: that memories of slavery might in some way have been considered inconsequential or, perhaps, to have retrieved these memories would have been regarded, in the anglo-idiom, bad form. In addition however a forgetfulness about the past also can signal not simply an absence, where nothing happens and all is a void, but also the moment when manifold *other* stories intervene, layer upon layer, to displace or conceal what might have been forgotten. The memory traces that are evident are often difficult to track and to interpret. But on occasion, as in this case, they are all that we have.

Historically: if in the metropole such a silence did exist about the Jamaican slave past at the moment of decolonization itself, then it would prove of great value to speculate on the conditions which allowed this silence to be lifted. In 1968 the influential anthropologist, W. E. H. Stanner, delivered the annual Boyer lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's equivalent of Britain's Reith lectures. He set out to imagine what 'a less ethnocentric social history' of Australia would look like. In the course of his argument he addressed the question of what he called 'The great Australian silence', by which he meant white forgetfulness about the role of the Aboriginal peoples in the continent's history. He believed this forgetfulness to have been systematic, and -- through unspoken agreement -- to have been socially sanctioned. But he was not convinced that a silence of this sort, however systematic, was immune to change. What once was unspeakable, he claimed, could under new conditions again enter the speech of the nation. 'Like many another fact overlooked, or forgotten, or reduced to an anachronism', Stanner observed, 'and thus

consigned to the supposedly inconsequential past, it requires only a suitable set of conditions to come to the surface, and to be very consequential indeed'. Thus the historical question which faces us is how the memory of slavery in the Jamaican past, and of Britain's location in this history, ceased to be 'inconsequential' and came to be 'consequential'. Or in other words how Gillian's question can be deemed important in 2007 and of little pressing consequence in (say) 1948 (the symbolic beginning of the great postwar Caribbean migration to the UK, represented by the arrival of the *Windrush* in June) or in 1962 (the year of Jamaican independence).

Many historians and commentators argue that, at the time of decolonization, there occurred within British public life a kind of amnesia about the imperial past. Often this is described as a trauma. Generally, if not always, the term – trauma -- has been used descriptively, in a bid to convey the historical enormity of the collapse of imperial Britain, rather than attempting in any strict sense to draw upon the conceptual psychoanalytical protocols in which, in contemporary intellectual life, the idea of trauma is most commonly positioned. Myself, I'm reluctant to follow too closely this argument about social trauma: the difficulties in transferring attention from the damage done to an individual psyche, expressed (or not expressed) in the unconscious, to the dispositions of an entire social formation, seem to me to be too compacted for historical explanation. We might learn from these debates, but they can't be appropriated untransformed.

In two respects, however, there may be value in pursuing this line of thought. First, if it is tricky to identify a collective trauma, it is possible to demonstrate, across the culture as a whole, a degree of forgetfulness about the colonial past. If the concept of trauma begs too many questions, it is none the less historically appropriate to point to a measure of amnesia in Britain about the colonial past at the end of empire. Second, trauma theory suggests that what is most significant might occur long after the event which precipitated the initial crisis. From this comes the notion of 'afterwardness' – the idea, for example that a historical event (decolonization, for our purposes) may register most profoundly in its aftermath rather than in the event itself. This, to my mind, *is* an aspect of trauma theory which is usable, in a practicable sense, in endeavouring to think through the complexities of periodization and historical time. I'll return to this second point later.

Just as Marx suggests that there is an element in the forgetfulness in the reified form of the commodity (concealing its historical conditions of production) so an analogous argument can be made about the relations of colonial production. Stuart Hall, a Jamaican migrant to Britain in the early 1950s, expresses this most simply when he reminds us (literally reminds us) about the significance of *tea* and *sugar* to the social life of Britons living in the metropole. Very rarely have those who produce the tea or the sugar come into the field of vision of the metropole: the social relations of colonial and slave labour were always geographically distant from the metropole, abetting a kind of abstraction about the lived consequences of unfree, racialized labour.

In the 1940s and 1950s this forgetfulness about the origins of the physical commodities produced in the empire also extended to a forgetfulness about the racialized human bodies who produced the tea and the sugar. Many white Britons were perplexed by the influx of black migrants from the West Indies, experiencing the present as radically divorced from its colonial past. The generic British question addressed to these new migrants, expressed in a tone of bewilderment, turned on the mystery of 'Where are you *from*?' There were many documented occasions when we know that the expected answer was Africa, a place-less, history-less Africa of the metropolitan imagination, which conformed to the crudest colonial fantasies. It was precisely in this context that the Barbadian George Lamming was compelled to insist in *The Pleasures of Exile*, published in London in 1960, that 'We have met before'. These are words which express the weight of the historical past, and which seek to bring into consciousness an entire history. The 'we' comprises both the migrant West Indians and the Britons of the metropole. To an English ear there is something disturbing in the directness of Lamming's formulation, which unsettles an empirical cast of mind. Met before? How could this be? Where could such an encounter have possibly taken place? On the face of it the answer proposed in *The Pleasures of Exile* is straightforward enough: that the meeting of West Indian and Britain occurred in the colonial past. The fate of colonized and colonizer had necessarily been intertwined. No colonized, no colonizer. Or in the terms which run through Lamming's essay: no Caliban, no Prospero. To apprehend this past was to bring into the present, for the colonizers, barely acknowledged memories of a history which had generated an epoch of colonial violence. But in a startling inversion of the conventional

colonial nostrums of the time, Lamming tells us it is the black migrants who possess the deeper consciousness of the historical past. 'I am a descendant of slaves', he writes, 'too close to believe its echoes don't touch the present'. The English, we know, take pride in their nation as an old country: civilized, cultivated, respectful of custom, tradition and history. But this can also be an inducement to forgetfulness. For when the English misrecognized the West Indians, they misrecognized too something of themselves, forgetting where *they* themselves had come from.

This misrecognition, however, in turn was dependent – in the years before independence in the anglophone Caribbean – on the resistances to acknowledging the slave past in the Caribbean itself. In a fine and justifiably well-known passage Lamming, in *In The Castle of My Skin*, brings the ambiguities of knowing and not-knowing out into the open. Barbados is not Jamaica. But the passage serves to illuminate the *articulation* of memory and amnesia. It depicts the celebration of Empire Day in a school in the middle of the 1930s, and opens with memories of Queen Victoria, 'a good queen because she freed them' -- 'them' being the slaves.

An old woman said that once there were slaves, but now they were free. The small boy was puzzled. He had seen prisoners several times. They passed in chain gangs early in the morning on their way to work. And he knew what that meant. They were being punished. After they had served their sentence they would be free again. But the old woman wasn't talking about that. She was talking about something different. Something bigger. He asked the teacher what was the meaning of slave, and the teacher explained. But it didn't make sense ... He told the teacher what the old woman had said. She was a slave. And the teacher said she was getting dotish. It was a long, long, long time ago ... It had nothing to do with the old lady. She wouldn't be old enough. And moreover it had nothing to do with people in Barbados. No one there was ever a slave, the teacher said. It was in another part of the world that those things happened. Not in Little England. The little boy didn't like the sound of it. He had dismissed the talk about slaves, but he was very anxious for the old woman. Who put it into her head that she was a slave, she or her mother or her father before her? He was sure the old woman couldn't read. She couldn't have read it in a book. Someone told her. Moreover she said she was one. One of these things. Slave. The little boy had heard the word for the first time and when the teacher explained the meaning, he had a strange feeling ... Thank God, he wasn't ever a slave. He or his father or his father's father. Thank God nobody in Barbados was ever a slave. It didn't sound cruel. It was simply unreal ... They would forget all

about it since it all happened too long ago ... They had read about the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror. That had happened so many hundred years ago. And slavery was thousands of years before that. It was too far back for anyone to worry about teaching it as history. That's really why it wasn't taught. It was too far back. History had to begin somewhere, but not so far back. And nobody knew where this slavery business took place ... Probably it had never happened at all. The old woman, poor fool! ... She must have had a dream. A bad dream! They laughed quietly. The whistle was blown. Silence, silence! It came up like a ghost and soon faded again.

The old woman's folk memory of slavery provides the boy with one perspective. But this unwanted, disturbing memory is subsumed by other perspectives and by other stories, such that he comes to perceive slavery, in Barbados, as unbelievable and 'unreal'. One story ('this slavery business') is pushed out of his psyche by another (the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror and all it represents). Stories of the past gleaned from official authorities (schooling, book-learning) gain greater credibility, allowing the boy to mock the ignorance of the old woman. But there is the hint, as well, that the boy's initial puzzlement doesn't vanish completely. In the laughter of the boy and his companions, in their consequent silence and in the 'ghost' which comes and fades, anxious traces of the memory of slavery remain, present but unspoken or unspeakable. This is so in the psyche of the boy himself. But, as Lamming indicates in the novel, this forgetfulness or unspeakability comes as well to organize the public cultures of Barbadian society.

This captures, in fiction, something of the movements between the interior world of the psyche and the larger external, social -- and in this instance, colonial -- world. It raises crucial issues about the ways in which, in our own times, race and colonialism are remembered. Forgetfulness does not necessarily imply complete oblivion. A totally forgotten world would be nothing. More often, maybe even always, forgetfulness leaves traces which may not be present in the conscious mind of an individual at all, or which may be displaced. So far as a collective culture is concerned, forgetfulness is closely connected to unspeakability, as Lamming shows in *In The Castle of My Skin*. This suggests not that some disturbing past event is invisible in public life, but that it cannot be spoken in a way that allows it to have purchase in the present -- which is also what Stanner was proposing when he discussed the 'unspeakability' of Aboriginal life in Australia in the 1960s.

Those arriving on the *Windrush*, and those who followed them, on entering the field of vision of the metropole, appeared to carry with them no history. They arrived on British shores as if from nowhere. On a chilly dawn morning in Tilbury on 21 June 1948 the newsreel cameras were present to record the arrival of the black migrants – all of whom were described as Jamaicans, irrespective of where they originated from, a conflation which was to be common for the next ten or fifteen years, and another form of forgetfulness. The journalist – a white man in a mac, bluff and genial – stops Lord Kitchener, explaining that his reputation as the King of Calypso (and, apparently, Jamaican) precedes him. When Kitchener agrees that he is indeed the King, the journalist prevails on him to sing for the camera. The first social act in *Windrush* Britain is for a white man to ask a black man to sing – suggesting, here, the presence of memory-traces arising from the longer duration.

Thereafter, for the next decade, the public fate of these various ‘Jamaicans’ was to function as an object of state and social concern. Winston Churchill, shortly after becoming prime minister, noticed another boat arriving with migrant West Indians. ‘Please advise where these Jamaicans go after they have landed’, he minuted. Panics arose about the prospect of there being black postal workers, black police officers, black shop-workers, black milkmen, black bus-conductors, black teachers. In a great collective labour of imagination, just at the moment when the colonial world was facing its demise, a new colour bar was instituted in the social life of the old metropole, one that silently drew its inspiration from the practices of colonial authority.

Not too much can be read from a single, momentary item on an old newsreel, depicting the arrival of the *Windrush*. But this forgetfulness assumed many manifestations. A more significant example of this historical myopia, evident in a social institution of great cultural authority within the nation, can be gleaned from the coverage of the BBC. In the postwar years the weekly magazine the *Listener* functioned as the literary or intellectual record of the more highbrow reaches of the BBC. It didn’t aim to provide a detailed map of all that was broadcast, but cumulatively it indicated what was deemed important in the BBC’s intellectual world, combining a mix of transcripts of radio-talks, journalistic features and snippets, and reviews. Calculating that it published something like thirty articles in each

weekly issue, over the decade of the 1950s it would have carried a total of rather more than fifteen thousand articles. Of these, for the entire ten years of the decade, there were not more than twenty articles explicitly about the Caribbean. There were one or two programmes broadcast on literary themes which never came to be transcribed in the pages of the *Listener*. There were also a number of articles (though not many) about West Indians as immigrants in Britain, though these I've discounted. What were published were mostly the kind of pieces which nowadays compose the staple of in-flight magazines, many of which were only a few unsigned paragraphs -- Banana Day in Jamaica; sugar-making; cricket; the consequences of a hurricane; background accounts timed to coincide with royal visits; more on Jamaican bananas. With a single exception, none of the West Indian novels (the vast majority of which were published in the UK) appears to have been reviewed. (We might note too that when the *Times Literary Supplement* published a major survey on Caribbean literature, timed to coincide with Jamaica's independence in August 1962, the lead article exhibited not so much hostility -- though it was hostile -- as ignorance, complaining that too much of the fiction was 'obsessed' by race, but conceding that it did offer 'many wonderful glimpses of the scenery that can be found there'. This prompted a furious response from CLR James.) Most strikingly in the *Listener*, these were articles written by Britons, addressed to Britons. 'What manner of people are these folk of the Caribbean?', asked Theodore Sealy in 1953, in a characteristic mood of open-minded bonhomie. When Federation was discussed in 1955, the *Listener* turned to Sir Hilary Blood, an erstwhile colonial administrator in Grenada, whose tone was altogether more severe. The first sign of a reverse perspective appeared when A. E. T. Henry, a writer and one of the West Indian correspondents for the BBC during the 1953 Coronation, contributed copy on Jamaica's tercentenary, when he took the opportunity to speak for all the inhabitants of the colony ('We Jamaicans ... ') in order to celebrate the ties which bound Jamaica to the mother country. Right at the end of the decade a pair of articles by Jan Carew were published on Guiana, which had originated as talks on the Third Programme, and which aptly took for their title 'The Forgotten Province'. This audit of the *Listener* is salutary. It reminds us how distant, imaginatively, the Caribbean was for even educated Britons in the fifties, notwithstanding the fact that this was a time of increased migration. And it demonstrates how protracted was the process of West Indians representing for themselves their own lives and cultures.

It is instructive, however, to think as well how little the question of the slave past seemed to impinge on the Caribbean migrant community in Britain in the forties and fifties. I was surprised to discover, when I came to write this paper, how little of the migrant fiction deals with slavery. It is, precisely, the immediacy of the migrant experience which presses in, the experience needing to be articulated and told and retold until it took exerted a deal of purchase on the civilization of the so-called host nation. The generic elements of this foundational story of crossing the seas, retold in many different variants, attest to the compulsion, repeatedly, to tell of these experiences which elsewhere in the society had no valency. But in their tellings and retellings *other* stories, other historical durations, including those of the slave past, were eclipsed. The perceptions which underwrite Lamming's *In The Castle of My Skin* and *The Pleasures of Exile* are, I think, the exceptions. Vic Reid's epic historical novel, *New Day*, for example, published in 1949 as a symbolic affirmation of Jamaican nationhood, opens in 1865 with Governor Eyre and closes in 1944, the moment of universal adult suffrage. The slave past is entirely absent. So far as I recall, none of the other Jamaican novels and plays which appeared in Britain in these years (Andrew Salkey, Sylvia Wynter) addresses the issue of slavery either.

Even where one might most have expected to have come across some reflection on the impact of the slave past on the political present virtually nothing is to be found. From 1958 to 1964 Claudia Jones edited, produced and ran almost single-handedly *The West Indian Gazette*. The *Gazette* served as the organizer of anti-colonial, anti-racist opinion in the migrant Caribbean community. Its marxisant Pan-Africanism connected directly back to the expatriate agitators of the 1930s – CLR James, George Padmore, Ras Makonnen and so on. This was a paper which continually campaigned for the teaching of West Indian history in the Caribbean, and for West Indian children in the UK. Yet here too there is, so far as I can ascertain, not a single considered judgment on the Caribbean slave past.

It is worth adding, in parenthesis, two points. It might seem as if CLR James's 1938 *Black Jacobins* would have served as a historical model, providing precisely the conceptual means for thinking the connections between the colonial past and the political present. But when this was first published James was at pains to insist that the book was written for *Africa*. At the same time, his – as I see it – rather abstract Pan-Africanism also worked to disconnect

him from the Caribbean, just at the moment when the labour rebellions were breaking out across the region. Second, in 1944 James's erstwhile pupil, Eric Williams, published in the US his ground-breaking *Capitalism and Slavery*. It was another twenty years before a publisher could be found in Britain. It is certain that the historiography was, at this period, completely untouched by any conception of the degree to which the slavery of colonial times reverberated in the emergent postcolonial world of the postwar epoch.

This audit could be extended, but – spelling out the absences – doesn't make for a compelling narrative. If, as I'm suggesting, this history represents the inconsequentiality of the slave past, as understood in the immediate postwar years, it is also the case that the formal moment of decolonization in the anglophone Caribbean (signalled most clearly by the independence of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in 1962) worked, in Gramscian terms, as a passive revolution, in which the mobilization of the popular classes played only a minor role in the final moment of breaking the colonial relationship with the mother-country. The emergent political elite, the beneficiaries of the rebellions of the late 1930s, stepped into the shoes of the former colonial powers, with only a modicum of renovation of the institutions of the state. Symbolically, one can apprehend the balance of forces articulated in this moment by returning to the film-footage of the festivities organized to mark the independence of Jamaica. Looking back on it, it appears – in a double-sense -- like a parody of colonial mimicry. Ball-gowns and morning suits for the elite, a white princess (an English rose, it seems) foxtrots with the dark-skinned leaders of the new nation, legions of black boy-scouts and girl-guides, countless detachments of assorted local military in varieties of ceremonial dress rehearsing the movements of the military tattoo so popular at the time, the presentation of the parliamentary mace evoking all that the Westminster system might promise, a clutch of Anglican clerics: the official rhetoric of independence welcomed the future nation by evoking the deepest recidivist ghosts of the colonial past. Of course, as in all such official moments of national celebration, there was at the same time much that was contrary and profane. But within the official proceedings the only presentiment that another future might pertain was marked by the inclusion of Count Ossie (who as a boy had grown up in a Rastafarian community), and who – on this occasion – offered no doubt what was perceived as local colour, by presenting some inspired African

drumming. What the rituals of independence suggest, I think, is that at this moment the historical memories of colonialism were peculiarly *underdetermined*.

But alongside this narrative of British historical amnesia there are, in its interstices, instances of other countervailing stories incubating. These are complex formations owing to their essentially diasporic form, moving back and forth between Jamaica and Britain. They are stories which attest to 'another Jamaica' less under the sway of colonial habits: blacker, more deeply creolized, excluded from the foundational postcolonial settlement marked by independence. They work to a different historical tempo from the imperatives of formal politics: indeed, they might not even be regarded as formally political at all. There are three dimensions in play. First, there occur those experiences which are largely migrant, developing as a response to the conditions of existence of the first and second generation of West Indians choosing to settle in Britain. Secondly, there are those dimensions which are profoundly diasporic, impossible to situate as either British or Jamaican, particularly in the domain of vernacular musics and performance. And thirdly there are the developments in Jamaica itself, from the second part of the 1960s, which although local in historical specificity fed back, through diverse channels, to the UK. I'll say something – briefly – about these first two dimensions, and (perforce) take the last as read (the return of Garvey's body, the Selassie visit, the Rodney riots, Black Power).

In political terms (formal political terms) these can be understood as 'delayed' or 'secondary' moments in decolonization, obeying distinct temporalities, and articulating distinct cultural logics. They reveal and attend to what might be understood as a properly postcolonial agenda which the formalities of independence could never quite reach, touching the UK as well as Jamaica.

In Britain from the late fifties and into the sixties the signifiers encompassing black-Caribbean-Jamaican came not only to be revived, but gradually moved to the centre of national life as contested, divisive markers of the social dislocations of the postcolonial nation. Although it is difficult to find an appropriate conceptual language which can chart these symbolic movements, I'd suggest that the idea of Jamaica and its past moved from a relatively dormant state – underdetermined and apparently signifying only a forgetfulness

about the distant colonial past – to an active, combustible state, in which memories of the historical past were overdetermined precisely to the degree that they came to articulate the political locations of the present. Indeed, to a significant extent the political and cultural fractures within the domestic nation were (at times) lived out through contrary appropriations of the symbols of Caribbean life (in general) and Jamaica (in particular). The intensity of this transformation may suggest that the forgetfulness associated with the Caribbean in Britain in the late 1940s and 1950s did indeed carry within it the potential for a great surge of collective memory to be released, and to become very ‘consequential’ indeed.

Two important breaks can be identified. First, the white riots of August and September 1958 were critical in demonstrating the limitations to the dreams of black assimilation. To read the popular press, day by day as the crisis unfolded, is to witness the dramatic re-imagining of the figure of the black migrant as an antipathetic presence within the British body politic. If at the beginning of the riots British people were happy to confess how little they knew about the Caribbean new-comers, by their end they knew all they could wish for. In a clear revival of the colonial past, many white Britons came to pride themselves on the diligence with which they had come to ‘know the native’. Opinions about the disposition of the West Indian migrant began to pour off the presses. In terms of state intervention, it was from this moment that the black migrant came to be perceived primarily as a police matter. (The arrest of Claudia Jones, after she had attended the London party to celebrate the start of the importation of Mount Gay rum to Britain, received much coverage in the West Indian press.) According to Stuart Hall, active in west London in these weeks in offering succour and protection to those under attack, the young white racists whom he interviewed

may have had difficulty finding some of these (imperial) places on the map: but in one sense at least, the youngsters know, with a terrifying and distorted precision, what these names stand for. Here is the primitive barbarian, the ‘black man’, abused in a score of governor’s houses, beaten in a hundred district officers’ huts, but who has lived on to haunt the nightmare world of a fifteen-year-old girl. The terrible tragedy of colonialism – not the past only but the present as well – has at last come ‘home’.

Indeed it had.

This was also the moment when, in the face of the disregard of the local (Westminster) politicians for the fate of their West Indian constituents, the chief minister of Jamaica, Norman Manley, made the journey to London to meet with West Indian migrants and to press their case in the public media. His presence in front of the cameras, commanding and old-school, offered the *possibility*, for the British public, to recast their inherited ideas of what Jamaica represented.

In response to this crisis, some West Indians returned home, while others endeavoured to build a new life for themselves in the mother-country, but relying on their own symbolic and political resources rather than those on offer as assimilated Britons. This was the explicit reasoning behind Claudia Jones's inspirational decision to reinvent Trinidadian carnival for the cold and unwelcoming streets of London. As a consequence of these transformations, the identifications with Britishness proved harder to maintain; those with blackness offered new possibilities.

The second significant beak – difficult to chart with precision, but momentous none the less – occurred within the field of vernacular performance and music. The shift from ska to rocksteady to reggae, although driven by the conditions of existence of urban Jamaica, was also evidence of an essentially diasporic history. If ska provided the soundtrack to the vision of independence which the official proceedings never quite captured, reggae signified the phase of a secondary decolonization in which the syntax of Jamaican popular life was central and in which memories of the past were overdetermined. Reggae, though, possessed its metropolitan dimensions. In 1970 800 reggae records were produced in the UK, preceding the great reggae breakthrough of 1972-3. In this period, and running through to the moment of Britain's own manifestation of Black Power in 1980-2, the possibilities of blackness, as a resource for the future, were manifest in the electronic beat of reggae.

The years of British reggae, though, were dominated by the presence of disparate, contrary political and cultural currents, suggesting perhaps that the 'afterwardness' of decolonization (or in Hall's phrase, which could be heard often enough during these years, that the empire was coming home) was in fact then taking place. These were, simultaneously, the years of Enoch Powell, which turned on old memories of colonial white authority coming to life

again, and taking new forms. Reveries of the imperial past – of the moments when white folks could go about their business unmolested, when racial order prevailed – fed into the political life of the present. While reggae was bringing into the imagination the entire history of the Middle Passage and black suffering as a decisive constituent in the making of the modern world, the sentiments of the Powellites were depicting a lost time of whiteness which could only be recovered by the most drastic means.

Yet this symbolic division which ran through the metropolitan nation was never simply constructed on the near binary between black and white. As Dick Hebdige argued long ago, the arrival of ska and rock-steady generated a ‘phantom’ history in which elements of the musical cultures were appropriated, possessed and reworked by many different constituencies with many different ends in mind. As he suggested too of reggae, dread ‘was an enviable commodity’ to possess, which could serve contrary purposes. Reggae addressed communities ‘in transit’, and it wasn’t only the Jamaican migrants, or their sons and daughters, who believed themselves to be ‘in transition’. Dispossessed whites, too, believing their own worlds to be in a process of dislocation, could take for themselves the essential stories which were contained within the rhythms of popular reggae. Symbolically, the consequences were complex.

Yet this does nothing to distract from the fact that it was through reggae, and its associated musics, that the emerging collectivity of what soon were to imagine themselves as black Britons could imagine their blackness. It was through reggae that establish a communion with the past and imagine a future in the Babylon which was theirs. It was in the music, too, that memories of the slave past were once more articulated, after a prolonged period of silence. When in 1975 Burning Spear asked his listeners if they ‘remembered the days of slavery’ he was asking a larger question than perhaps he ever realized.