

Calypso Lament

Colin MacInnes

Next, West Indian blacks have always had a meagre advantage denied to black Americans: never, in the islands and even at the nadir of their fortunes, have they been a minority among whites. And it may well be this that accounts for the disproportionate number of black American militants who, in this century and even before (as long ago, in fact, as the Haitian rebellion), have been of Caribbean origin.

Then, there is blackness. It seems hard for whites to grasp it, but this, to blacks, is an essentially political weapon in their struggle. For if you haven't got wealth, power, or national base of any kind, what else are you left with?

It should not be thought that all this is any discovery of mine, or unknown to any black I have yet met. West Indians are, politically, highly literate: incomparably more than we are, simply because they have to be, to survive.

Black Power propaganda, in effect, consists far more in saying simply to fellow blacks, "Get up off your arse, man" than of telling anyone anything much that they don't already know either through personal experience, or else from a thousand hereditary tales.

Consequently, though Black Power militant groups in England may be few in numbers, I'd say there are equally few, among the 300,000 West Indians in our country, who disagree with basic Black Power premises. For example, I offer a prize to anyone who can find one single black who thinks Angela Davis is guilty or that, even if she were, she would be so in any way that means anything to black people.

"So why do you come here, if that's how you feel?" The first answer is that West Indians were invited here, by legal acts freely passed by ourselves and for whatever motives, after world war two. You can't play a cricket match and then, when you don't happen to like the way the game's going, tell the visiting team, right in the middle of the game, that you'd like to change the rules.

The second answer is that West Indians feel, as no other immigrant group quite does, or can, they have a right here: that they gave a lot, as God knows they did, and that we owe them something.

Nor is this debt only ancient. In both world wars, West Indians, without conscription, volunteered to fight in Europe, a habit they began (though this seems little known) by sending seamen to Trafalgar. There are men and women of my age whose fathers came as soldiers from the islands in 1914. I vividly recall their arrival, in 1940, when we "stood alone." I look forward—or rather, don't—to the reply West Indians might give to ex-Brigadier Powell, once a fervent propagandist for a large colonial army, if he invited them to fight for him in some future conflict.

As to the present, would even most unemployed men and women take on the jobs West Indians do and have done? In transport? Catering? Night factory shifts? Hospitals? And being a young and vigorous people, who gains—and will do for decades

—from their taxes and insurance stamps, paid out as pensions and for chronic sickness?

So it's not all that easy to be a West Indian immigrant to this country. You are black and the natives don't like blacks. You come from one of dozens of islands that know less of each other than a Queenslander does of a West Australian. You have also to adjust to big city life, of which none exists on the islands, and which is disconcerting even to a native of a rural or small town background.

You find it difficult to get the job you think you can do, even if of equivalent skill to anyone and even more, to get promoted in it. If you have young sons and daughters, it's hard to get them the best education (their IQs, measured by tests devised by whites, give peculiar results); and when your Bradley and his white mate Tommy, go from school to the Youth Labour with an identical scholastic record, Tommy somehow gets the job. You'll find your mortgage, and your car insurance rather more difficult to get; and as for the courts and their impartial justice . . . oh, Lord Jesus!

Here is my distillation of "moving with" West Indians since the late 1940s:

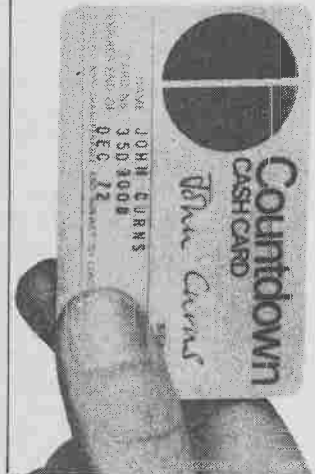
1. Brave. I have yet to meet a Caribbean who is physically a coward.
2. Resourceful. Prodigiously so. Eustace, arriving at Waterloo station at 2 am in February, wearing a tropical suit and having lost all his money in a whoopee game on the banana boat, is a month later in a job of some sort, has got a room of some sort, has friends of both sexes and races, and can direct you all over London, if you ask him the way.
3. Courteous. Their only rivals are the Irish, and we could well learn manners from them both.
4. Reasonable. Contrary to much popular belief, West Indians are an immensely sagacious people, in their personal relationships. Interfere or try to bully and you're in trouble. Behave yourself and ask and they'll help you, within reason.

Only one defect, that I can see—the reason for which lies in old and recent West Indian history. Not as good as other minority groups in sticking together, except under extreme pressure; but circumstances are forcing West Indians to learn how to do this fast.

What I owe most to West Indians, after thousands of encounters, is:

1. Patience, tolerance and kindness beyond words.
2. A vision, through them, of what a society looks like when you've none of the privileges and most of the handicaps.
3. How to write English. Much English prose, today, is as dead as a doornail, in grown, lacking the infusion of new blood—speech constantly needs. I have borrowed shamelessly from African and West Indian English—neither of which are "broken English," but fresh, re-created English languages of their own. (The only critic to spout this element in my opus was, needless to say, a French academic, writing a doctoral thesis on it).

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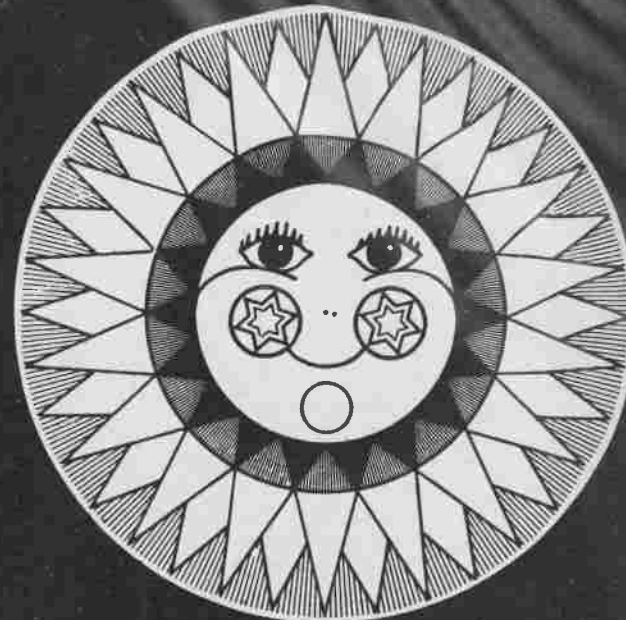
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