The full interview with John La Rose[1]

More than twenty five years ago I was asked to interview John La Rose for the arts and culture journal Variant 19. Malcolm Dickson was then editor. The interview took place in John's house in Finsbury Park. Malcolm organized the recording apparatus and also jumped about taking photographs. I had known John for a few years by then and had been in his company quite often; my only plan, therefore, was to start talking. He was a very strong and experienced orator, and with a tremendous breadth of knowledge. He was used to the toughest forms of meetings, those that began in confrontation and moved towards negotiation. I knew he would go where he thought necessary and return near enough to the starting point: my job was to resist interfering.

The general population are unaware of the depth and complexity of the struggle of black people and other minorities in the United Kingdom. This transcription of a talk by John La Rose allows an insight into that and of the richness of the Caribbean side of its social and intellectual tradition. Insight here is gained into the inseparable nature of the culture and the political. There is also the matter of John's own centrality to some of the more crucial political interventions in his time. It should be a matter of concern how easily such a figure can be airbrushed from the political and cultural history of the UK, and the fundamental role played by John La Rose, his peers and contemporaries.

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[1] A reduced version of the interview was published in issue 16 of Variant, in the spring of 1994 and the full version in my collection of essays, And the Judges Said . . ." For further information on John La Rose, New Beacon, the Caribbean Artists Movement and related cultural and political struggles visit The George Padmore Institute in Finsbury Park, London, England: https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/

JK: You knew Cheddi Jagan, I noticed your name in the index of a book I have by him, in fact his autobiography.

JLR: Yes, Cheddi Jagan came when I was there, in Venezuela, and I introduced him to various people, because he was trying to come to terms with the problems of the rice industry and the Federation. Leaders were trying to tell him to come and enter the Federation and he was finding it very difficult, because the Indians did not want to enter the Federation. They saw themselves being swamped by these Africans in the islands. That's the central political mistake Cheddi made. Nevertheless he came there to sell rice and I was able to help him to sell the rice to keep his Government going, because he was under pressure from the British Government, the United States and from the Caribbean Federation leaders. So with that, coming to England in 1961 it meant that I brought all that experience.

JK: Okay, so maybe now, picking up on CAM, the Caribbean Artists' Movement.

JLR: CAM was very significant because of the fact that this was a movement that sought to deal with the artist as a totally vulnerable person engaged with other artists in a very vulnerable way; and that kind of engagement had been unusual in Caribbean society and that made the experience extremely valuable in elucidating our own lives as individuals and as artists, as people involved in politics and so on - because we would have these long nights of discussion. Cabral says, 'it begins with culture and it ends with culture.' With CAM we always began with culture, in the sense that it was always a cultural subject for discussion. But it took in everything, so that when we had a private discussion subsequent to the public discussion, we would need to talk about literature, politics, music, culture; everything in society. And in talking about everything we were exploring ourselves, exploring society and societies. Coming from the Caribbean you had a really great experience of societies. In Trinidad we have the Chinese, French Creoles who came with the French Revolution from within the Caribbean to Trinidad, we have the Spaniards who had been original conquerors of the Carib and Sarawak Indians in Trinidad, we have the English who took over from the Spaniards, then we have the Africans who were brought to work on the plantations. Although we're not a classic plantation society like Barbados or Jamaica. What happened was because of the need for labour after 1838 when slavery came to an end. We had the first Chinese who were brought to work on the plantations and we had the Indians. I grew up seeing Syrians selling cloth and I went to school with them. All these people, it meant you were really familiar with different societies. I am very familiar with Indian society, I have a feeling of growing up with it. That's what's so peculiar about it all. I was taught by an Irish priest. He taught me Greek at St. Mary's College in Trinidad. I hadn't known white people attacking other white people but here was this man attacking the English for the Black and Tans. He was obviously an Irish Nationalist. I did not know that white people could talk about other white people like that. The idea was that it was black people who were like that, you know, 'black and chicken can't do nothing'. Those kind of self-deprecatory, self-contemptuous sayings which have been imposed on society. But the revolutionary movement and the cultural movement weakens all these things, all the time. Everytime it moves forward it shows that it is not true: we can do these things, we can deal with the British. 1903 was a situation where we almost had power in our hands in Trinidad. The place where the

Government had its seat of power, the Red House, it was totally burned down in the water riots The Governor was tarred. There's a Kaiso [Calypso] about it.

JK: One of the things about New Beacon, it is like reclaiming the radical history and your own history in publishing.

JLR: That was very much part of what we were doing. We were doing it very actively as a political movement involved in popular culture. Popular culture in Trinidad, the Kaisos in particular, do make reference to all these events in our society. For example, there was a big march to Woodford Square, Port of Spain led by Butler the radical, popular leader in the 1940's. In those days transport was not easy from one end of the island to the other, and they marched for 70 miles into Port of Spain to protest what the government was doing in the Oil Industry and so on. They got into Port of Spain and invaded the Red House and after that they went round to the Governor's House. And there's a Kaiso about it: "The man in the garden hiding/hiding from Butler/oh come outside Mister come outside." That's the Govenor they're talking about. "Oh come outside Mister, come outside/Mister do not hide, oh come outside/Butler want to bust your ah ha!" You couldn't say bust your arse in the Kaiso so "Butler want to bust your ah ha". Our Kaisos do incorporate all that experience from 1925 when we had our first elections on a limited basis. We have "Who you voting for Cipriani?" Captain Cipriani was the leader of the Labour party in those days. We had had the Working Men's Association and then the Trinidad Labour Party came out of that. We were part of the International Working Men's Movement, as were all the movements in the Caribbean in the 1920's.

JK: These kind of Working Men's Associations' were crucial places; you had them - or slight variations - in various cities, London and Glasgow, New York, Warsaw. Books were available, so you could go in there and just read, talk to people.

JLR: Ours had been the Trinidad W.M.A., which subsequently became the Trinidad Labour Party. I knew all that history extremely well, both in terms of our oral history and I also made a special study of it in our libraries. We had a Trinidad Public Library since 18-something. They had the West Indian section in the Public Library - that's where the West Indian books were kept!

JK: We have Scottish sections in our libraries right now. And in the bookshops, Scottish bookshops, they still genrerize our own culture; you get these wee sections tucked round a corner, often in quotes - 'Scottish' - that's where you find Scottish writing, contemporary literature or recipe books for haggis, what's the difference, all stuck side by side.

JLR: I didn't realise how funny that was until much later. But in the West Indian section I was able to go and read extensively and borrow books. I did a comprehensive study of all that for quite some time as part of the political, cultural work we were doing; this included a production of a poetry reading in the library, you'd be surprised that one of the books I was looking for was by Rabindranath Tagore, he was quite famous among us. I couldn't get this particular book by Tagore, the *Gitanjali* till a friend who was the Deputy High Commisioner for India in Trinidad got me a copy for the poetry reading. It really meant that when we came together in CAM we got a lot together.

JK: It is also the organizing, you are bringing this tremendous organizing experience from various outside things, which is crucial.

JLR: You see Kamau Brathwaite had been to Africa after he finished his studies at Cambridge University. He got this job in Ghana. It was that experience that made him understand the traditions of African society and the Caribbean in the way he understands it and writes about it in his books. He was also involved in the education movement there and he wrote a play for schools, very much used in Ghana. Although he had done history at Cambridge he was also very interested in literature. He is still regarded as a historian but he's really more interested in comparative literature and histories.

JK: The key term you're using, 'comparative'. With you and Andrew Salkey and E.K.Brathwaite, apart from the fact that there's all these different societies, you are from three different countries basically, so you are bringing a whole kind of range of different ways of working in comparison.

JLR: But you see there was a common experience coming from those islands, which had to do with the fact that we were colonial territories of Britain, fighting against British colonial domination, what we called battleship democracy. They were not as actively involved in that because they left the Caribbean younger than I left. I left when I was 31, Kamau at 18 and Andrew at a similar age too. I was much more formed within the Caribbean experience than they had been. Nevertheless they had been attached to that experience all along, both in terms of their study and their work.

JK: And they were anti-assimilationist as well.

JLR: That's right, they were not for that. Not only that but Andrew and Kamau came from very interesting families. In Barbados there's a house called the Bay House, where Kamau grew up - it is in all of his poems - the sea's at the back of it and the Roman Catholic Cathedral on the opposite side of the road. That's where he grew up as a young person. His Grandfather lived inside the country. Barbados is a small place but it is the country where they're concerned, and it is in all the poems. Kamau's sister wrote a piece - there was a celebration for him recently at the Community College in New York - and his sister, called May Morgan, wrote a very brilliant piece on Kamau's work, showing all the references from the place: the genus loci, it is all there and she knows it. No other literary critic could pick that up, but she describes it in great intensity.

I would think that coming here to England: firstly none of us were starry-eyed about Britain. I knew a lot about British history, I was anti-colonial. I knew of Churchill and his corruption and all his family in the Cabinet; things of that sort. There's nothing here to impress me, I was not impressionable about British society. I was very detached, looking to understand more of this colonial experience out of British society. I made contacts from the top to the bottom of British society. Just like I did when I lived in Venezuela, I mean I had meetings with the President right down to the bottom of the people. I had all these connections because I genuinely wanted to understand the nature of this colonial experience and how it had affected us and colonial societies, culturally, politically. Socially in all kinds of ways, and what that interaction means. And we were doing all that here, exploring all of that all the time within CAM - exploring it in terms of the writers and their writng.

JK: We were talking earlier about the autonomy of New Beacon. There's a kind of related thing that I have found an exciting notion about what you've been involved in, the way I have interpreted what you've been doing and thinking about it. Besides being a publisher and writer you are creating a whole autonomous community in the sense that you have the publisher, you have the writers; with luck you have a sympathetic printer, you have the shop - to sell the work; you are creating, and you are your own customers. So there's a complete self-sufficiency within this, it is in a sense is the ideal.

JLR: It happened by chance. Firstly my going into book publishing was not by chance but the question of book selling was by chance: partly because of the fact that here in London all the books I wanted to get and read, there was no place I could buy them. So I decided at some stage that we would really do the international book service. That was the very first book service of its kind ever done from the Caribbean. I was a Caribbean specialist so it meant that I did a booklist in French, Spanish and English. The very first catalogues we sent internationally to everywhere, so it meant that people came here all the time. This was still in the 1960's, people came to our house and worked downstairs - here in Albert Road, Finsbury Park, London. I talked to so many people writing their PhD's or post-doctorate research for hours downstairs. It was that kind of place. It was a home, you couldn't just walk in, you had to get permission to enter and once you entered you were made comfortable. These were friends really and they came from the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, Asia. But they were all Caribbeanists, some were Africanists. So it was that kind of international connection we built right here in this house. The book-selling was partly encouraged by CAM because at that stage there were new writers being published every now and then. Some of the sessions involved discussing the new work, some of the sessions might have been private but it was always a free autonomous thing. it is a question of interacting with ideas and between personalities. People should not supress what they think for this or that reason. Encouraging free and open discussion was a very important part of what we were doing. And in a certain sense you are making yourself vulnerable by discussing all you think personally, your own feelings - which is important for the artist, to talk about your feelings and intuitions as well.

JK: That vulnerability is almost a contradiction of what society in Britain is, a real kind of anathema.

JLR: And we really made an intimate relationship among ourselves. But it was not a constraining relationship, it allowed for - the phrase I used - 'free development of free individuals', which is a famous Marxian phrase, that's what was happening within CAM.

JK: Would that be one of the reasons why it was so attractive to so many people? One of the things again that I found exciting about it was the cross-generational thing. You had the young Ngugi, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Darcus Howe, a lot of young people; and you also had C.L.R. James being excited by it, who was 40 or 50 years older. Thinking about the kind of influence you can infer about what Ngugi has been doing in and out of Kenya. And also what L.K.J. was doing in his poetry, and also moving into the 70's the different things they were involved in, having derived in a way from much of the ideas and interplay of CAM - cultural activists, but also there was the political side continuing after CAM terminated.

JLR: Linton was involved with CAM in a way that Darcus was not. A lot of people from Britain and abroad became involved with us post-CAM but they understood and valued the experience.

JK: Which also includes an organizing capacity, seeing an organizing potential, and strategy.

JLR: Correct and it really makes politics, culture, social life one indivisible experience.

JK: You see, I felt in my own case, that that was missing in Scotland. It was the organization that was missing. There was a lot of kind of tentative good things going on. You had writers' conferences in the mid-70's, various things were happening in the 60's. But these organizational and comparative things, this crucial point about how do things go on in other societies, what these people have been involved in. All these things are so necessary.

JLR: It is strange but we always thought highly of the Russian writers. We felt a distance of geography only. My personal interests were in music and literature and I came across Gorky quite young, when I was about 13. I had never read anything like Gorky's short stories. Later on when I was interested in music in a much more serious way I was very interested in what are called the 'Nationalist 5': the Russian composers CuI, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev; I became very interested in what these composers were saying. Now it subsequently connected me up with the meaning of the Russian revolution. Later when I met Sarah [White] she was researching the reception of Darwinism in Russia in the 19th century for a PhD at Imperial College and that told me a lot more about how to read world society. But that all began in my teens.

JK: Knowing how other people organize though, I read a biography of Sun Yat Sen. What they did was just incredible. But again it is this organization, looking at the way they organized.

JLR: We had a direct link with Sun Yat Sen in Trinidad through a man called Acham Chen, a Trinidadian Chinese who'd left to go to China and was part of Sun Yat Sen's movement. He became the Foreign Minister. Of course we knew a lot about what was going on in India because the Indian Congress movement sent representatives to Trinidad. Wherever there were these overseas Indian populations they sent them. So in Trinidad people knew about the Congress movement.

JK: The same in South Africa.

JLR: Like with Gandhi yes. We knew about the Congress movement and what they were fighting for, the fact that people were being banned from going to one place and another. If you read something which we published not long ago about the history of the Negro Welfare and Cultural Associations, it is about movements I connected up with after reading (James) Maxton's *Lenin*. I went looking for these organizations, looking for the study group movements and so on. Eventually we formed a connection with the remnants of the Negro Welfare Cultural Association. They had been the organization which had been organizing the workers and the unemployed in the north of Trinidad, joining up with the Southern Workers Movement in the 1937 General Strike and Popular Insurrection. They had this connection whereby they knew what was going on in the Indian struggle for independence. One got that kind of information second-hand. I had not then read Nehru or Gandhi's books. So we were really connecting up with all that was going on in the rest of the world. For example, later on in England I was the Chairman of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya. When they were struggling with the Mau Mau - the Kenyan Land Freedom Army - and we identified with the Mau Mau struggle, we were getting information on it through the Communist

Party in England. We called our own colonial collaborators 'loyal Kikuyu' from listening to radio reports on the BBC. We were pretty well informed about India too from the Indian Communist Movement. There was all that behind us.

JK: It was a good influence from India, the influence of various people from there in exile in the United States etc. I was just thinking of moving back into the post-CAM period. There was a good statement you made, I'm paraphrasing: the time is over, there was a communion, we shouldn't worry about that, that's how it goes, there's something else we can develop - the embers from the fire. And I am looking from the outside but there seems to have been more of a concentration on political activism per se; now I am not speaking of yourself, but the kind of CAM experience in Race Today or whatever, and also some of the campaigning that goes on. Did art and culture remain important in that campaigning for example?

JLR: It was always here in London. For example, I became deputy chairman of the West Indian Student Centre, where we met mostly. Andrew [Salkey] had been there because he was still fed up over one of the parties run by the West Indian Governments. During that time there was a lot of activity stimulated by the presence of CAM at the centre. When we began to talk about the Black Education Movement and so on, it stimulated the students to get involved with it. There was a dance group and you know the poem by Okot p'Bitek called *The Song of Lawino,* they produced. I introduced the book to them, told them who Okot was, how important the book was. It is interesting how they did it, in a small room with no stage; and they followed it up with articles which we discussed where you can make theatre, how you can make it. You can make it anywhere. Now they would have taken that out of the centre into various things that they were doing. For example, I became involved in establishing the South East London Parents Organization (SELPO), which became involved in this political struggle in the area. Part of what they did was to write plays about the police and the courts. So the cultural activity was always part of what they were doing. It was not something we organized, they organized. These organizations organized as part of what they had seen out of the experience of CAM, because CAM was interested in both, doing productions as well as discussing issues. It was very important to all those youngsters. They are now into all kinds of things in British society. An explosion of black creativity took place, interestingly, in the plays and the poetry,

JK: Particularly in the performance. The performance has been so important in poetry, in other countries too; Kenya, Peru, South Africa. That includes the performance of prose writers.

JLR: With CAM 'performance poetry' began with Kamau's performance of *Rights of Passage*. It influenced a whole lot of that generation.

JK: I am thinking of that time in Scotland, about Jim Haynes who was there then. There was a famous event at the Fringe Festival round about 1961, when Trocchi and McDiarmid met on the same platform. Burroughs was there I think, John Calder too. Who else? Mailer? But the fight was Trocchi versus McDiarmid, it still gets discussed. I think Jim Haynes was directly involved in the organization of the event.

JLR: We knew of his paperback bookshop in Edinburgh and we knew of his work in theatre, and then he comes down here with the Traverse to the Jeanette Cochrane Theatre. We had met him through Sarah's father who almost lost his job because he gave Jim and his theatre a grant and Lord Goodman - the Chairman of the Arts Council - did not like it. We found we had a common experience, he had grown up partly in Venezuela. He was also open to what we were doing.

JK: But it is the idea that performance is so crucial. And when there is struggle performance also becomes an exchange, that's also taking part in an experience within your own culture.

JLR: That's why the play is such an intimate connection. I remember a friend saying, 'Why is it that you are not publishing more plays? Plays are a very significant element of the interchange within the culture, a direct form of interchange.' I said that I really hadn't thought of it in that way. We were having a big argument about it in Barbados - we were about to publish that book by Kole Omotoso on Caribbean Theatre - I did not realise that we had missed out in that kind of discussion about the immediacy of Theatre.

JK: I think it is important that plays are published, but you can not publish the performance of a play.

JLR: One of the things that happened in London that I recognized as an element of what had happened with us in Britain was this explosion of Black Theatre. It affected British Theatre in very significant ways, because there were these people meeting in small halls. That was what excited me about Jim's Theatre. All the plays he put on - Sarah and I saw nearly every one of them - were by living playwrights, which made it a very contemporary Theatre. Some of them became quite famous. That play Loot by Joe Orton, we saw it there where it was first produced. Jim told me he had made a mistake, he had not taken out all the rights; so when the play became famous and made so much money they were not making the money they ought to have made. So when I heard Kamau reading *Rights of Passage* I thought that this was the place where this ought to be produced and told Kamau right away. I did not know if I could produce a whole reading of a long poem but I knew that Kamau would be a very powerful reader, so we could do a dramatization and stage it at the Cochrane.

JK: Part of the objective thing, getting it away only from one writer. It's a central element so lacking in mainstream literature is this indigenous aesthetic, this validation of particular cultures, your own culture. Talking about what's happening here, there's all these different things: here's a writer, here's a poet and here also is a working language. All these things that say this is our culture, this is our language. We can discuss it, here are artworks, all of that. These things are central to a person becoming valid as a person. You can only do that once you've seen this is your culture, you do not have to turn away in embarassment because you've met someone from your own place, or someone stands up in public and reads something from your own background, your own culture. Whereas, part of the colonial experience - as it is also in Scotland - is you're taught to be ashamed of your own culture, you know, inferiorization. If you're down here in London and a guy starts talking in a strong Scottish accent you wind up blushing with embarassment. Thinking about that effect in the 1970's where that is part and parcel of the self-confidence of going into the street, of challenging authority and not being put down by authority: the right to self-defence. All these things become part of valuing yourself and your community.

JLR: You are absolutely right. The young people who became involved in all those struggles; there was a girl, Althea Jones, she was doing chemistry, but she came out of the cultural experience in Trinidad, and she came to London and straight to CAM She knew about me from Trinidad; she came into a cultural and political situation here that she had just come out of back home. She later went and joined the UCPA which became the Black Panther Movement. By that time she became part of the Mangrove Nine case. She was finishing a PhD thesis and she was a very powerful orator. It was to them that John Berger gave the money when he got the Booker Prize, which made a scandal. They bought a house on Tullington Park Road in our area, Finsbury Park, which they used as their headquarters. She came out of the same experience as myself where politics, art and culture were one holistic thing. I found it very difficult to understand the nature of artists in British society who somehow kept themselves away from these things, compartmentalized and out of a constantly vibrant and changing social life.

JK: They're trained to, they're trained to seperate them.

JLR: In a certain sense they become entertainers. You'd go to opera or plays and I would talk - especially the English elite - the first thing they would say is 'it was a success' or 'it was interesting'. On the whole I noticed that the language was not an effective language of communication and interchange with the artist and his work. Not that they were not critical people. But they were critical people who worked for the newspapers. They were not prepared to commit themselves to an independent original opinion which they might have, which they should have, about a work of art they'd seen on the stage. I was always freely commiting myself to what I thought.

JK: That's part of the education system, that you are taught not to do that. You are taught that personal experience and responses are invalid.

JLR: I would freely make a comment about how I saw it and try to engage the others about their feelings about it. I thought those things were important, not simply the intellectual presentation of it and the intellectual understanding, also their feelings, how they intuitively responded. Intuition is so important.

JK: The intellectualization is a rationalization. That becomes a reflective thing anyway, you are moving right away from experiences.

JLR: I always noticed people used these bland phrases about their experiences. In my view you couldn't really move your society with bland expressions, you had to really engage in a serious interchange between both individuals and social groupings. Within CAM we'd gone to the ultimate to do that with the people who were intimately involved with the work of CAM The private sessions we called 'Warishi' nights - from the kind of things the Amerindians in the interior and the Pork Knockers, used for carrying heavy loads on their heads.

JK: I was thinking here of the separate way in which art and politics are here. It is interesting the way that art is devalued because of that. The kind of disinformation that says the function of art is basically decorative or whatever. Even within the left that's the case; art generally is devalued from within the left, because it is regarded as being predicated on the fact that it is not political - unless it is a particular case, a kind of ‘well here's political art’ and ‘here's a still life’ and ‘here’s a portrait’. It is really weird but of course it is part of the education process anyway, a very essential part, kids being kept disinformed.

JLR: As I told you about Venezuela, they were all political people, all very artistic, cultural people, so that all these things had been interconnected all the time in their life experience, on a daily basis. It was not something they'd separate one from another for particular occasions, because politics is so much part of the experience of life it means that with the intimate experience of politics you are also experiencing life in a particular way. My subsequent understanding of it is that people bring to politics what they are. They can not bring anything else. So if you are a highly developed person, you bring that to politics, whatever way you've developed you bring that to politics. There's nothing idealistic about politics, in that sense you know, there's nothing idealistic about politics. There's a phrase, 'come the revolution'. I say there's nothing like that. My argument is the very opposite: it is the very process by which we live and so that makes this a continuing constant process. There's no end or beginning in a revolutionary process: it is a continuing process.

JK: These kind of statements are made, people say things so they do not have to examine reality. It has always been beyond me the way people can say that art has been divorced from politics. It is as if they'd never looked at what's in front of their nose. So many writers talk about, "Well you cannot change things, nothing gets affected by what a writer does." It's total nonsense. If we just look at the opposite side of the coin, let's look at a negation of that. Let's take countries that are in struggle, people who are in struggle: what do the governments there do to their writers and artists? We might well say that artists and writers do not think that they affect things, okay, but state authorities and the right-wing, they don't think that. Christ they kill them! It's too obvious to even discuss, the only question is how come we still get the propaganda. And taking something like early Reggae I mean Rock Steady, Ska and all that, Blue Beat, and the subversive qualities. Gordon Weller talks about it in terms of language: the actual language that people are using is so creative.

JLR: It is all there in the language of the Kaisos and in the language of the Reggae, of all these popular arts and songs. The songs retain that tradition longer than the political experience, long after people have forgotten what Burns said and why he said it, they're still singing the songs. And it is important that we try to understand what these songs were in their context, because it gives us a reference with this changing human experience. I know that because it is so pronounced in the Kaiso. The Kaisonians themselves were from the working class and their focus is from within the working class looking at the rest of society, from within the experience, from below.

We did not begin to study what the British did in the 1930's until recently - how they were seeing us, what we were doing to counter British oppression and colonialism - and it showed what all the different groups of the working class were doing at that period. There were three people, the Governor and a man called Nankivell. Although he was Colonial Secretary he seems to have been a radical and he met with the people. Now when the General Strike, uprising and insurrection took place in Trinidad he was looked at by the Colonial Office as the guy who was not behaving properly and eventualy he was sent away after the strike. I found that interesting because another guy came over as a colonial administrator and he made a statement about oil and the fact that the Oil Companies had been saying the oil was *not* going to dry up. And they'd been saying that it would dry up for the last 20 years but that wasn't true and so he too was sent away. A researcher told me that Nankivell died on a train and I said, 'MI6 pushed him off.' I am almost certain that MI6 did it to him, he was part of the movement in the 30's and the Colonial Officer was very annoyed with these Trinidad Administrators who couldn't handle the strike well enough for them. Susan Craig writes about this in *Smiles and Blood*.[1] There we were looking at how they were responding to us and the movement for the transformation of Caribbean society and against Colonialism and the

British connection in that particular period. What in my view is significant is that it shows the creativity of ordinary people in society. People do not look at creativity as political creativity, they see it only in terms of cultural creativity, the writers, the artists. But when you look at what that creativity is, especially in the case of the Caribbean in the 30's, it is working people who learn how to understand the colonial experience, who find ways, all kinds of ingenious ways of dealing with that situation, confronting it and winning battles against it.
But a significant section of that grouping - there's a similar kind of group which Malcolm X and people like that came out of in the United States - they are semi-unemployed or unemployed and they become highly articulate, highly creative in terms of how they organize other people. That happened here in 1981 with the Brixton riots, the Uprising. The people who took on the police were not active political people, they were ordinary people whose sense of Britain was a sense of tremendous police action in the area, plus all kinds of social oppressions, from school to unemployment and so on. They took on the police in a very military way, attack then retreat, then simply disappear. And that's how the unemployed behaved in the Caribbean in the 1930s. So I understood that creativity does not simply mean a writer or a musician, creativity means social creativity as well, which involves all these people whom other people regard as the 'ordinary zero' in society.

JK: Again it's just this disinformation that is right the way through our society. People are taught to think of themselves as being a zero, that you are part of the 'lumpen proletariat'. Even activists within the left, they have this debate about it. Again it's like what's in front of your nose; look around, the Poll Tax or whatever the activities and experiences are that ordinary people are doing and having. The forces of the right always sees a need for that infiltrator, they don't see self-determination. In Scotland recently with the Timex struggle, the quality

Sunday papers made such a great play about that sort of stuff, 'It's Militant or the SWP responsible.' They would not allow the Timex workers the right to think for themselves: 'They're being led by the nose, all the things that occur, occur because of these infiltrators.' It's like the old US State propaganda from the 1950s about Ho Chi Minh or something, every time something happens their agents are sent out to find the proof and the proof is the arch villain Ho Chi Minh, he's got to be lurking about somewhere, doing his infiltrating, and even if they don't find him they'll say Ho Chi Minh is keeping himself out of sight, they can't imagine him not being involved.

JLR: Creativity is something that we've got to look at. I was very familiar with it, much more than Andrew [Salkey]. It was for us a total education. What is this creativity, and how this creativity operates within societies. And how it changes a culture. How does it move a culture into different kinds of areas which previously it had not attacked. For example, these black youngsters here in London who say "Self-defence is no offence." It was their slogan. And "Come what may we're here to stay." It was their slogan. I did not invent it. Their parents were not saying that. I belong to the parent generation. I always knew I could go back to the Caribbean if I wanted. Even those who had come with the intention of going back in five years, when Powell came along and said, "You'll all have to go" - talking of repatriation and so on - they had to face up to the reality of their situation in Britian. Some of them took the money and went back home. The youngsters, they're the ones who faced up to the police in Brixton and everywhere in London. The police were framing them up all over the place. Those slogans, 'Come what may we're here to stay' were their slogans. It also affected how people in France thought. They began to say "J'y suis juy reste." I am here and I remain here. This is ordinary creativity. It was very much part of what we understood a popular movement to be. It teaches people how to organize themselves so they become part of their own independent autonomous organization, taking on these matters that affect them.

JK: That could take you into Carnival.

JLR: Carnival is that kind of activity as well. Again, you couldn't study Kaiso without Carnival, Carnival and Kaiso went together. What is interesting about Carnival - in Trinidad it is similar to Brazilian Carnival - what is common to all of these is a certain Catholic relationship with the Africans. Within their culture, the place they find themselves, Brazil, Louisiana, very Catholic countries; what they do is they creatively respond to that. Because the Carnivals that these others brought were an end to the flesh. Sin and so on. It comes before Lent. Two days of total and absolute abandon. Lent comes and for forty days you are supposed to be repenting in the flesh with physical and mental flagellation. So you have two or three days of total abandon. Now that's the Carnival and you are on the streets. At that stage the white people introduced some of their tradition into the Caribbean, in Trinidad, and in the other islands who had some French connection. So the Africans entered into that in the 1830s because they are now free, and they reinterpret that in terms of their own festival experience, which is drum, singing and so on. In Africa there are a lot of praise-songs but there are other songs, other traditions, where you sing songs about what you do not like and what's bothering you, the song that satirizes what is in society, and that's what the Africans reinterpret.

JK: Just as an aside, I was also thinking of these Soweto singers. In all the Townships there would be these variety events, where these popular events would have singers singing satirical stuff, things about local people, anecdotal even.

JLR: This appears in the Carnival. Now what they call 'Jouvay' (Jour ouvert), daybreak, it usually began on the Sunday night, the field slaves would march through and terrify the town. They would do that because they were reenacting their loves theatrically and musically in the Carnival, in the road, on the streets. Now that led to the riots in the 1880s and the British suppressed the Carnival, which is very like what I see in the Carnival in London. I see the connection there very easily. So they suppressed and regulated the Carnival. Instead of it starting in the night and terrifying people - they also had torches, that was the danger - they were in the streets, enacting their past and as a result of that these riots happened. The authorities in the 1880s regulated the Sunday night, started the Carnival at six in the morning until the night. The Carnival has this revolutionary tradition. Its popular creativity has been immense, with everybody doing what they can in the situation, music, dance, song and the organization. So the Carnival is all that plus it is the greatest popular festival, which incorporates most of the society for three or four days.

Then there's the carnival that begins after Christmas, with the Kaisonians in their tents, where the Kaisonians are moving the population. It is preparing the people for Carnival with all these songs about what's going on in society, with all these political comments, all these tribunes who are the Kaisonians. Especially at the stage before 1925 when we had the first elections in Trinidad. Even up to the 1940s there were two main aspects of the Kaiso which were very pronounced: first, the Kaisonian as Tribune, speaking for the people, because there were no elected representatives, not by adult suffrage, not until 1946. So from the Kaisonian as tribune out comes all the grieviences and all the problems and aspirations of the working class. Then there is the Kaisonian as Entertainer: that was becoming more pronounced after the 1940s, after the war, when we were moving towards Independence;

and with all the Americans who came to the country, people were entertaining them for the kind of money they never got before. These two traditions intertwine and one of them is more dominant than the other at particular phases in the life of the Kaiso. The Kaiso is what presents the whole situation and creates the atmosphere for the Carnival. It begins right after Christmas and continues up to the Carnival. In the earlier days the Chantwell or Chanteur of the Kaiso, the singer, was in the band and the band was the chorus. So it was really a very communal experience and that's what makes Carnival a very strong tradition. What makes people stronger is that the bands were completely autonomous. Each band chooses to play what it wants to play, how it wants to play, who is going to sing what song. Nothing to do with any other band or the government or anybody else. It is totally autonomous creative expression. All the creativity in the population - in the kinds of costumes they would make, what colours they would use - is totally autonomous. It is a very democratic tradition, very anti-authoritarian.

This is another aspect of the question that makes carnival such a dangerous thing. Nobody asked the police or Home Office for permission to make Carnival. When they went into a group and wanted to play Carnival they simply went on the road. It was such a normal thing to do in the Caribbean. And they won that right. There's a Kaiso about it: “The road made to walk on Carnival Day, the road is ours.” All these governments recognize how dangerous it is. People on the streets are always dangerous to governments anyway. The time when Fidel Castro made an attack on the Moncada barracks to overthrow Batista on July 26th, it was the moment of Carnival in Santiago, with all these massive amounts of people on the streets. There's always that danger with Carnival for the authorities, but it’s freedom of self-expression and creativity for the mass of the population.

JK: One of the legal things here is that there is no actual right to do anything else when you are on the streets other than walking, to get from A to B. You do not have the right as such to be in the street. You have the freedom to assemble but there's no right for it. I was also thinking of Breach of the Peace. If the Police exercised the powers that they have - theoretically, as I understand it - then they could charge every single person at any time of the day, even being asleep, with Breach of the Peace. And if the full weight of that was ever attempted by the State, it could be revolution, it could be finished in a day. I think the example of Carnival demonstrates something about it. You were talking about how people were scared of this thing. It reminded me of the time when 20,000 people marched in London, bringing the city to a halt, I always have this image of the gents in bowler hats looking out the window saying "What the hell's this coming over the bridge!"

JLR: The Black People’s Day of Action for the New Cross Massacre was on the 2nd of March 1981. I will never forget that. It was something that had not happened since the Chartists, back in the 1830s. People had not marched across London into the City. We had to negotiate with the Police, I would chair the meetings. And that decision came from within the meetings of the Black People's Assembly. People would be saying: "Man we have got to do something about this thing. The Police can not get away with this thing!" That kind of talk went on. And they said, “Yes we'll go on a march.” “Where are the guns!” That kind of talk “We want some guns!" And I said, "Have you heard of a man called Brigadier Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*?” If you haven’t read his book then you should read it. Because if you are talking about going to Parliament with guns you have to take on Kitson." He had been the Commander in Northern Ireland, he was G.O.C. in Britain. I said, "Let’s talk seriously, you are starting at the end, let’s start at the begining."

We had that sort of interchange all the time at the meetings, very open, free meetings. So they said “OK we'll go on a march.” We said, “Well what day are we going to march?” Because the normal marches took place on a Sunday, when nobody’s working, everyone's home, the people said that they wanted it to be on a day when the British are bound to take notice. So what day? We had to disrupt British society, that was absolutely clear. That is what we were saying in that movement. We wanted to snarl-up traffic all over London.

So we decided it must be a Monday, that came from within the audience. We wanted to make this place realise that we're serious and we're going to disrupt the whole of British society. We aren’t going to work that day. People had been talking about the question of a Black general strike since 1964. That was highly impractical at that time, but the idea was there.

We already had the experience of the first demonstration of about 2,000 outside the house where the massacre took place, there in New Cross Road on the Sunday after the 18th January 1981. We stopped there for hours. The police could not move us from the street. We disrupted the traffic coming from the South of England. They were trying to move us but they did not dare. They could see people were going to burn down the place or something. It ended peacefully and people went away. But on the other day, when we met with the Police from the City of London as well as from the Metropolitan Police, one guy - Superintendent Paul Kinghorn I think he was - he came with a map and told us where we could go and so on. I said, "You listen carefully, we have decided that the route we're going to take is the route. And we're going as far as Blackfriars Bridge. We have to have a further meeting of the Assembly, and when we're finished with that, we'll come back to you again and tell you where else we want to go."

Paul Kinghorn had never met people talking to him quite like that. He was trying to intimidate us. The leading officer from the police never

said a word during the negotiations that we had. Then we told Kinghorn, "If you do not take us seriously - you are just the Police, we are a political grouping - if you do not understand that then we will deal with the Home Secretary, not with you. So the next time you come to negotiate, you better bring someone with authority."
That's what we told him. The next time they brought the Deputy Assistant Commissioner and his aide. By that time we had finished the second part of the route. But the route he wanted to take us was different. But we had the route we wanted, we had it decided. The police are very informed, and we learned a lot about negotiating with them. The police never tell you what their own plans are, they only want to know what your plans are.
What demonstrations in the past usually did was to march on Hyde Park into Whitehall. We said we were going to go where the people are going to know that this is happening, we're going to march in all those areas - like Peckam - before we come into Blackfriars Bridge. That way you are going to hit that area of London with all those people who are really concerned about what's happening in the whole New Cross area, and then march through the financial centre, the City, and shake up the place, terrify them.

JK: It is amazing how people allow demonstrations and marches to be totally controlled by the police. In Glasgow they always start them on a Saturday in a quiet part of town, office buildings, nobody's there. It is crazy, they've allowed the agenda to be set about the nature of their protest. In Britain most of the organizers of these things are all part of the official Labour movement anyway. They deal with the Police all the time, they negotiate with the system. It is just a total contradiction.

JLR: We were confronting the system, quite deliberately and clearly. I had to go to the House of Commons because of what happened. They did nothing about it. We saw them the day before the demonstration and they said "Why do you not stop at the House of Commons sitting that day, to show how you felt about those people who were killed." The Mps we spoke to then put on an Early Day Motion, about what had happened at New Cross.

JK: It may be quite important to say here that with the New Cross Massacre thirteen black teenagers were murdered and no one has been charged with this thing, and it's 12 years later. People just don't know that.

JLR: We could benefit from our experience. Michael Mansfield and Ian Macdonald, other lawyers, were involved in that case and we were handling most of the major cases of that kind at that particular stage, dealing with those major cases ourselves.
What had happened was that the police were trying to pin the event on some youngsters who were at the party. Because of that we were able to prepare ourselves for the Inquest. Because of our experience in fighting all those cases prior to 1981 we knew how the police handled those cases in court and at Inquests. It is the police who decide what is the evidence before calling an Inquest. We had to prepare ourselves and get collecting the evidence ourselves. We collected evidence from people who were themselves involved at that party. We had a lot of evidence to give to our lawyers. So they were not relying on the police, even in the evidence, and at the Inquest they could question the police.
The police were rotten throughout all that business. The Coroner behaved abominably. The whole press saw it. Because of the kind of influence we had we got the Inquest held in the Chamber of the G.L.C. It lasted for thirteen days.
So that evidence that they were trying to pin on those boys - this is what they had done in other cases, the Guilford 4 and so on - they failed in

doing that. They spent about £250,000 doing that. They had about fifty policemen doing that. Having done it, saying that 'These are the boys who did it,' they couldn't come back now and say who else did it. When we went to court again about this particular matter they admitted they'd been wrong trying to pin it on the boys. But they had no further evidence to apply as to who else may have done it. They never pursued it. But what they were not able to do is what they had done in the case of the Guilford 4 and others, to pin it on those boys. They failed to do that.

JK: Thinking again about these fights against racist violence, the brutalities. What in effect the campaigning group was doing was of course police-work, the work of the police. And they also have to go and get the evidence because it is already been decided by the police what the crime is, and the first thing they always say is "It wasn't racist." Thinking again about that way of confrontation, where it becomes a genuine protest, the other thing is you have to break the law. In the sense if it's serious, any campaign, if you are going to do it properly, because it is always in their power to do you for sub judice, or hold that up to you.

JLR: I had some legal training in Trinidad. I had come here to study law but I abandoned it within the first year. Nevertheless I knew a lot about law. So here I knew what you had to do to present statements about your case and not break the *sub judice* rule. Darcus knew. He'd trained in law as well. We were also dealing with most able, brilliant and sympathetic lawyers. Most lawyers whom you deal with in these matters want to control the case themselves, and we knew much more about these particular matters than they did. We also knew exactly the line of defence you've got to take in the cases, and we won most of them.

So coming to that inquest in 1981, the New Cross Massacre, we were really much more prepared than any other grouping in British society would have been to handle that Inquest. That is why we were able to defeat the police in their manoeuvres. Because they went all out to show politically, that what this group of people were saying from the beginning was not true, that the people who had done it were the boys themselves at the party. That's the line they were feeding the press at the very beginning. That's how the press reports these matters. The police give them the information and they report it.

But we had a strategy to deal with that. We formed our own Independent Commission to investigate this particular matter. And we also fed information to certain members of the press about what was happening. So it meant that there was a counter to the general police media strategy. We countered it ourselves in the radio, TV and so on. The police did not have as free a sheet as they would normally have had in dealing with a political matter of this kind. The other important factor was that because we understood the Inquest we knew that it was there they would make their stand to publicly denigrate all that had happened: all that we had done; the Black Peoples' Day of Action, the previous demonstration, the campaign we were organizing, and so on. Therefore we knew we had to prepare for that Inquest very carefully to counter their influence, and we did.

They were really encountering a different kind of political process from what they were normally accustomed to, when they walk through a thing - almost without any opposition. Everyone benefited from the experience that we introduced into this way of handling these matters. Because after that all kinds of groupings knew how to handle these matters. We made our way, our method of dealing with these matters, as widely understood as possible. People were ringing us from Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham - all over the country. And we'd go and help them to organize their cases. We got involved in teaching them how to do it. That's another aspect of creativity that people do not really take as creativity. It is creativity.

JK: Again, our system is designed to do the opposite. it is designed that you do not do that, that you give it to this guy who gets paid £50,000 a year, and he goes and whatever, talks your politics for you.

JLR: It was very much part of what we understood to be a popular movement, and what it has to do. It teaches people how to organize themselves so they become part of their own independent, autonomous organization, for taking on these matters. After a time I do not have to go there at all, they know it and see it through themselves.

JK: It is the opposite of a vanguard in that sense.

JLR That's right. They understand what they will do themselves and they will do it. What happens with that experience, with all the ultra-leftist organizations like SWP, where we're making something they're not accustomed to make...

JK: They can not cope with it.

JLR: No they cannot cope with it. They couldn't cope with us during that New Cross Massacre campaign, or any of the major campaigns. For us the courts were also an area of political struggle.

JK: Just finishing up John, a word maybe on CAM again, I was thinking about the visual arts

JLR: We were all interested in the visual arts, some of us were practitioners like Carl Craig. He went back and became Head of the

Jamaican School of Art. So we had all that experience, were very vitally concerned about it and interested in it. I thought that the articulation of ideas and theories about art was less intense within CAM Unlike the other arts - novels, plays, poetry etc. - what I discovered really was, we had not done for the visual arts what we had done for the others, where a serious kind of discussion went on. That was another aspect of the activity. Trinidad was awash with art and music. Because Carnival is fashion-art, it is a day of art with all kinds of artistic creations on display, music, song, dance. Yet we never had the same kind of theoretical discussions. But we had brilliant artists, like the painter Aubrey Williams, and Althea McNish, and the sculptor Ronald Moody, and we interacted with them. And they and their work influenced us and our experience.

JK: It raises some of these points about art and how we do it, as artists, from the indigenous culture. But some of these questions had been raised in CAM anyway, to do with, "What should I paint in the painting to show my commitment."

JLR: It is a hangover from the question of the role of the artist in society, from art for art's sake to the question, for example, of art in the Soviet Union, Social Realism.

JK: And there's that quote about figuration being missionary art.

JLR: That kind of discussion went on, although not to the same intensity in the public events in CAM It took place in the private events which doesn't figure in the documentation. But we were in general exploring and discussing, and creatively self-expressing.

JK: That was actually the bottom line, of initiating CAM anyway, as a place where artists can talk together.

JLR: Yes but it is not on the record. When you ask what it is that we'd discuss on Warishi nights, the only answer is about everything. And it went on for hours, like we're talking now. That's what made it so important for the artists in the long run. Obviously the artists were not really creating in those nights. The artists were still taking back to themselves whatever creative ways they could view that experience, to create both in theory and in practice. I understood that in politics things go like that too, you have periods of intense creativity, so I knew it would happen in the cultural experience we were having as well. I did not expect it to last forever. I expected it to last as intense as it was, then it would go away. It bonded us in a very important way; Andrew, myself, all the people who were part of that experience, immediately part of it. It lasts forever really, it has bonded us in very significant ways. It doesn’t impinge upon anybody's autonomy but nevertheless involves a deep inter-relationship, which does not require a lot of restatement of things really.