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'PEOPLES' WAR': CULTURAL ACTIVISM IN THE NOTTING HILL CARNIVAL[1]

BRIAN W ALLEYNE

> No social study that does not come back to problems of biography, of history and their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.
>
> C.W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

Introduction

Why has British cultural studies had so little to say about the political activity of the adult black working class population in Britain? Why has social anthropology seen blacks in Britain as lacking the cohesive culture which is believed to underpin ethnicity? And, relatedly, why has sociology, especially of 'race relations', conceptualised blacks in Britain primarily as a set of social problems?[2] These are complex questions, which it is not my purpose to answer here, but I open with them because they delineate the terrain out of which comes this paper.

Benson has questioned the tidy division between sociological and anthropological study of non-whites in Britain where black migrants and their social problems are studied by sociologists, whereas Asians and their 'deep' culture and ethnicity are studied by anthropologists (Benson 1996). Benson argues that social anthropologists in the structural functionalist tradition, used as they are to studying small communities which are seen to encompass a way of life, or culture, have found blacks in Britain to be problematic objects of study, lacking the key features

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1 This is a version of a paper presented at a seminar of the C.L.R. James Institute, New York, in November 1997. The members of Peoples' War have my thanks. I am grateful to Keith Hart, Jim Murray, Susan Benson, Nicole King, Brett St Louis and Melissa Medich for their comments. In addition to giving generously of his time for interviews, Michael La Rose read and commented upon an early draft of the present paper. A note on terminology: 'Mas' is an abbreviated form of 'masquerade'. In the paper 'DJ' and 'MC' stand for 'disc jockey' and 'master of ceremonies' respectively.

2 The first question is posed by Harris (1996); the second and third by Benson (1996).

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around which anthropological monographs have traditionally been built: ordered kinship and religious institutions and collective institutions of social control (Cohen 1993; Patterson 1963). Asians in Britain, by contrast, have been seen as exhibiting precisely these features in their communities (Ballard 1994; Watson 1979). Anthropologists have tended, according to Benson, to be uncomfortable with the notion of 'race', having long deconstructed it as a natural category.[3] Ethnicity – shared cultural identity which is more easily mapped on to community than is race – has remained the province of the anthropologist. Race, having been deconstructed, becomes a social structural category deeply implicated with power relations in British society, and so the perfect domain of sociologists.[4]

The anthropology of blacks in the modern world system has for much of this century accepted that African descendants in the Americas, and later in Europe, exist in social milieus characterised by dysfunctional family structures, economic hardship and the overbearing pressure of existing as a subordinate group whose very subordination is written on the body (Banks 1996; Mintz & Price 1992). The Middle Passage that symbolically separates Diaspora blacks from the 'ancestral homeland' is seen to have either robbed them of much of their 'original' culture (and/) or to have forced them to exist in a condition of cultural schizophrenia,[5] the condition described by Fanon as being a black skin in a white mask (Fanon 1967).[6] This view of Diaspora blacks as people with poorly integrated culture and richly elaborate social problems has been countered by a large body of work (e.g. Du Bois 1994; Fryer 1984; Hart 1991; Kelley 1996; Mintz 1996). Nonetheless, there still exist potent discourses which construe blacks as not quite having got the right kind of cultural capital to thrive in the modern world system (D'Souza 1995; Hernstein & Murray 1994; Jacoby & Glauberman 1995; Kohn 1995; Mills 1997). Where cultural forms produced by black Diaspora people have been studied the tendency has been to focus on the expressive forms of

3 Some critics maintain that anthropology has not fully shed its racialist past (Krupat 1992; Rigby 1996; Said 1985; Wolf 1982).

4 Some recent ethnography, highly critical of the way anthropology has tended to construe blacks (and Asians) in Britain, has taken a fresh look at the cultural formations of non-whites in Britain (Alexander 1996; Bauman 1996).

5 The 1940s debate between Frazier and Herskovits over African survivals vs. creolisation is illustrative (Mintz & Price 1992).

6 A number of scholars, most notably from the Caribbean, have sought to valorise the cultural hybridity of New World blacks, posing creolisation against both the notions of cultural in-betweeness and deracination favoured by much of the early work on the black Diaspora (Bolland 1992; Brathwaite 1971, 1974; Glissant 1989).

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music, dance and sport. This tendency has led Gilroy to condemn the discursive construction of blacks as creatures who feel intensely but do not think deeply (Gilroy 1993; Lott 1994).

Gilroy has conceived of the Atlantic as an imaginative as well as a physical space in which black people have struggled to constitute themselves as subjects in modernity. I do not read the term 'black' in black Atlantic as either denoting or connoting that this conception of the Atlantic world is an affair of concern only to black people; rather, I read the adjective 'black' as signifying the peculiar structural position occupied by non-Europeans in the Atlantic world, a position conditioned, and sometimes even determined, by discourse and practices pivoting on race. At the same time as defending this reading, I would argue that racial structuring is always already articulated with class, gender and other forms of structuration.

The contemporary black population in Britain was constituted mainly as a result of post war migration. The body of work done by sociologists and anthropologists on this migration has tended to view migration to and settlement in Britain in terms of persons moving in order to better their life-chances (James & Harris 1993; Miles 1982; Patterson 1969; Peach 1969; Phizacklea & Miles 1980; Rex & Tomlinson 1979; Thomas-Hope 1992). During the heyday of Caribbean migration to Britain (roughly 1948 to 1962) most migrants were working class or peasant; they took jobs in the openings at the lower end of the British labour market, which openings had been created by the post-war labour shortage and economic boom. Notwithstanding this fact, it is also the case that a minority of migrants from the New Commonwealth, including those from the Caribbean, were well-educated persons seeking intellectual careers in Britain either through the route of higher education or as freelance creative artists. Less attention has been devoted to this subset than to the overall group of migrants. This lack of interest in the *intellectual* activity of Caribbean migrants to Britain stems partly from forms of Eurocentric consciousness critiqued by Gilroy, which are blind to the intellectual history of the black Atlantic, and also from the relative reluctance on the part of anthropologists and sociologists to study blacks in Britain as cultural and political agents producing a wide range of ideological and practical forms which include but are not reducible to expressive popular culture. Even students of British cultural studies – a field willing to see blacks in Britain as more than a labouring mass – have shown little interest in the cultural and political activity of the adult black population of Britain (Harris 1996). Instead, they have focused on the more rebellious and visible black youth population (Hebdige 1976, 1987; Jones 1988): this may be partly explicable by the fascination of cultural studies with popular culture and youth, and its relative disinterest in more 'dated' forms of resistance like trade union

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activity. A related explanation may be rooted in the assumption by many students of political activism that as people grow older they become less politically active (Andrews 1991). One consequence of these tendencies in the literature on black social and cultural formations in Britain is that insufficient attention has been paid to the work of those black activists, and their white allies, who deployed a praxis that was self-consciously informed by the cultural history of the black Atlantic, and who employed forms of activism that are not reducible to popular expressive cultural forms. One such case, less visible than rioting black youth and less exciting perhaps than 'rude boy' music, is that of the North London-based Peoples' War sound system and Carnival band.

In this paper I look at the preparation and presentation of Peoples' War Carnival band for the 1997 Notting Hill Carnival in London. I begin with an ethnographic account of the band's 1997 preparation and presentation; then I draw on the personal narrative of one of the band's founders – Michael La Rose – regarding the setting up of Peoples' War sound system and Carnival band. In the concluding discussion I examine the strategies employed by Peoples' War to make a reasoned political intervention in the popular cultural formation of the Carnival. I argue that the leadership of Peoples' War attempt to impose a transcendent political project onto the transient popular form of Carnival masquerade. This case points to the subtlety and complexity of a cultural activist project undertaken by a small group of black Britons. It challenges both popular and social scientific discourses about fragmentary black culture that focus too much on popular expressive forms to the neglect of the ideational and historical complexity of black Atlantic culture.

Following C.W. Mills, who said of the 'sociological imagination' that it 'should enable its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (Mills 1959: 5), I proceed in three movements: ethnographic, historical and biographical.

1. Ethnography: 'United in Riddim': Peoples' War Carnival Presentation for 1997

> The theme of our costumes for Carnival 1997 is 'United in Riddim; Music of the Diaspora'. For a long time in the black community in Britain there were a lot of divisions, rivalries and petty island nationalism about music. Certain Djs, promoters, and radio broadcasters would not play any Calypso from the eastern Caribbean or Cadence from the French Creole speaking islands nor music like Hi-Life from West Africa.
>
> Our theme this year celebrates the beginning of the end of these backward thinking practises in Britain. Today all forms of black music

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> are constantly borrowing and fusing with each other, a good example is the fusion of reggae and Calypso to form Ragga-Soca. In dances and parties all over Britain you will hear a mixture of music from Swing Beat, Rap, Soca, Ragga, Zouk, Jungle, Soukous, Salsa and Garage. The more farsighted and accomplished DJ mixers have recognised similarities in all these musics from the black diaspora and blended them into musical mixes. We are on the road to respect for each other we are United in Riddim! (From a Peoples' War Carnival band Press Release)

The band launching

The 'band launching' is an important milestone in the annual cycle of a carnival band. Costumes having been designed and prototypes made and tested, the launching is when the general public first see the costumes which comprise the upcoming presentation. The 1997 launching of Peoples' War took place in June. The venue was on Sparsholt Road, about ten minutes walk north of the Finsbury Park tube and train station in North London. The heart of the event was inside a sports hall. A T-shaped stage had been constructed, as in fashion shows; the top of the 'T' projected into the audience, who were arranged around it on stackable metal chairs. About three hundred people were present. The walls were decorated with flags from across the Caribbean – including those from the French and Hispanic territories. I noticed the Brazilian and Nigerian flags as well. There was a small bar in a corner with *Carib* lager beer, from Trinidad, on sale.

I had arrived in the middle of the presentation of a section. Sections of a carnival band comprise all those persons wearing costumes of the same design and portraying the same theme; the section is the basic unit below the level of the band itself. On stage now were two women, dancing to ragga music[7] in costumes of gold, green and black. The women – one seemed to be in her thirties, while the other was an adolescent – danced along the stage, to cheers from the crowd. From time to time the older woman would treat the audience to a display of 'wining';[8] the audience were quite vocal in appreciation.

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7 Ragga is a recent variation on reggae music.

8 Wining (spelt 'whining' in the *Time Out* Carnival Guide) is the quintessential dance move for soca music. Basically it involves dancing from the waist, the pelvis is loose and gyrating, the legs and feet may or may not move. When done to pounding music and by many people at once, wining evokes a strong erotic atmosphere. Miller, during fieldwork in Trinidad, managed to get some wining done (Miller 1991).

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Three more sections were presented.[9] There was a 'Jungle' section, the costumes were black with silver trim. The masquerader in this section carried a round shield with an image of a lion on it, and a small spear. The accompanying music was jungle – ultra-fast tempo, mostly drum and base and no melody that I could detect. Then there was 'Soca', with costumes red, white and black and with miniature steel pans on long flexible rods attached to the back of the costume; the music played for this section was Soca – a dance-oriented version of calypso. Then there was the 'Ringbang' section, done in blue, yellow and black. The music was ringbang, an up-tempo Barbadian variation on the Trinidadian soca. For the Caribbean sections (i.e. all the sections save 'Jungle'), the colour scheme of the costumes was derived from the respective national flags of each country; and the accompanying music for the presentation of each of these sections was some type generally recognised as having originated in that territory: black, green and gold, and ragga/reggae music from Jamaica; red, black and white, and calypso/soca music from Trinidad; gold, blue and black, and ringbang music from Barbados.

The mas camp

The preparation of the carnival band takes place at the mas camp. This is basically a workshop where the costumes are made and where the management of the band meet and plan the upcoming presentation. The mas camp is analogous to the pan yard, where the steel pan players meet for practise and where instruments and other equipment are stored (Steumfle 1997). The mas camp is the band's base. It is their special place which is protected from prying eyes – especially those of rival bands; costumes are designed and prototyped in relative secrecy.

The Peoples' War mas camp occupies two rooms in the basement of a community centre at Bruce Grove in Tottenham. The two rooms are roughly the same size, about 20 square metres each. In one room fabric cutting and sewing take place; in the other room, wire bending, gluing of pieces, cutting of Styrofoam and plastic parts and painting/screen printing. The segregation of operations seems to revolve around separating fabric from solvents, paints and glue. In the final week leading up to the 1997 Carnival, the operations had spread out to occupy two large rooms on the ground floor of the community centre and one small room on the first floor.

During the height of the season, in the weeks immediately prior to the Carnival, the number of people working in the camp increased until

9 The full list of sections: Soca, Hi-life, Ring-bang, Ragga, Zouk, and Jungle. Each denotes a type of popular music of the black Diaspora.

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the two rooms became almost crammed with people, working without seeming to get in the way of one another. The first impression on descending the stairs into the Peoples' War camp is of Soca music playing at high volume, and the sound of laughter and talking. One could almost be entering a house party of Caribbean-heritage people in Finsbury Park or Brixton (or Brooklyn, New York, for that matter), based on this evidence of the ear. But you soon realise that there is work going on here, underneath the music and talking.

Along three walls of the assembly work room, there was shelving crammed with tins, boxes and tools. A large steel locker contained the band's archive. A stereo sat in one corner and constantly put out Soca and ragga hits from previous carnivals. There was a large television in another corner, carrying the coverage of the Athens World Athletics championship. The middle of the room was occupied by several large tables on which work in progress and tools were laid out. One had to navigate around this table to get from one side of the room to another.

Part of the etiquette of the mas camp is that anyone who drops by after the launching (when the element of secrecy is past), whether they are known to the band members or not, should lend a hand. In return, the person is offered whatever food or drink is (always) available. Taking a drink is obligatory for the mas camp volunteer – unless he or she is a teetotaller on religious grounds. I was hardly settled in at the worktable with glue stick in hand when John invited me to 'fire one' – to have a drink. He pointed me to a large aluminium sink and drain board, splattered with paint in countless colours, where two bottles of white rum and several litres of fizzy drinks stood ready. John was the kind of jolly Trinidadian I found familiar; his relationship with people around him was jocular. Michael, by contrast, was more intense, he had the responsibility of co-ordinating the work of the by now two-dozen or so people present. He moved around setting up tasks for everyone; from time to time he would be called over for advice: 'Michael, am I doing this right? Michael where are the large scissors? Michael we need more glue here; Michael we need more rods for the Soca section' ... Michael knew where everything was and all that had to be done and how.

The big day – 25 August 1997

The day began overcast and chilly; very un-carnival like. I got to the Finsbury Park station at 9:27; the idea was that we would wait there for a chartered bus and other vehicles which would take the band members to the Notting Hill area. About 100 – 130 people were assembled outside the 'Rainbow' – the building designated as the meeting place – at least half seemed to be children, some in part of their carnival costume. The temperature was 18 degrees Centigrade; it was going to be a very

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strange Carnival if it did not warm up. Around 10:00 the bus and mini-vans arrived, and the masqueraders climbed aboard. As I was waiting on two friends to join me, I decided to let the convoy go on without me and to travel by underground to Notting Hill.

Out of the tube then a twenty minute walk from the Ladbroke Grove tube station and we located Peoples' War – I recognised the music trailer that I had helped to decorate two nights before. It was parked at the side of the road. Band members in costume were milling about. Michael and Keith La Rose were in the music trailer, acting as DJ and MC. Costumed members of the band were around the music trailer dancing or making last-minute adjustment to their costumes. The young women, who were a majority of the costumed members of Peoples' War, were intent on practising their wining moves; one lone (and brave) teenage male in a costume went to join in – he moved his hips in synchrony with the women around him; they responded with giggles and open laughter. Rum was passed around by some of the adults; a few parents and adult stewards[10] moved around fixing bits of costumes.

Michael and Keith organised the sections by shouting instructions, directing some to the front of the trailer and some behind. The Soca music was now on high volume. The temperature was rising. I began to catch a feeling of excitement. My two Italian friends bobbed to the tempo; they did not wine. The excitement was palpable. Either Michael or Keith on the microphone shouted: 'Peoples' War, we moving now! Watch out, Peoples' War coming!'.

At the front was the 'United in Riddim' banner borne by Sally and Samantha. They were followed by the flag women,[11] who carried a selection of the national flags of the Caribbean. The visual effect – the large banner and flags in many colours borne by these women – was stunning. For a short time it seemed almost that the last two centuries of colonialism were overturned: Peoples' War, with its vanguard of flag women, was conquering English territory.

Later on in the day, after getting separated from Peoples' War in the crush of people on Ladbroke Grove, I stopped on a long straight stretch that seemed a good place from where to watch the bands go past. Not long after we had settled at the side of the road a trailer came up

10 The stewards try to ensure that the band stays together and in orderly sections; in the crowded parts of the parade route they string and hold ropes around the costumed players, forming a rather flimsy barrier between the masqueraders and the roadside crowds.

11 The flag woman in the Trinidad Carnival is a long-established institution. This woman bears the flag of a steelband or carnival costume band – she precedes them onto the competition stage and through the streets. Traditionally this woman is selected for her physical fitness, and for her ability to wave the flag and to wine provocatively.

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blasting out what sounded like rap music. On this trailer were about a dozen or so young black men in dark suits and with neat haircuts: Nation of Islam. One of their number was atop the trailer with microphone in hand, delivering a long rap about the need for the 'black man to respect himself, his women, his children and his community'. By this point in the day we had seen more than three dozen bands. This – the Nation of Islam float – was the first to have only men on its music trailer. Three or four Nation of Islam men walked on either side of the trailer, close to the pavement, exhorting people to buy the 'Final Call' newspaper. There was a bit of grumbling from a group of women near to me: 'What are they doing here? what carnival has to do with them?' was the gist of what they said. For myself I thought: a Nation of Islam float in the Carnival? in there with all those wining women? It was surreal.

The air of surreality was reinforced when the band immediately following the Nation of Islam's turned out to be the London School of Samba. The contrast could not have been greater. From grim-faced, sombre-suited young men to two hundred samba-dancing masqueraders – mostly women. They in turn were followed by a band of young steel band players, black, white and Asian. The world of the Carnival having been momentarily turned upside down by Farakkhan's followers, was set right again.

2. History: The Development and Spread of Trinidad-Style Carnival

As discussed by Bakhtin, Carnival in medieval Europe was a public, stylised portrayal of passions which church doctrine held should normally be strictly controlled (Bakhtin 1984 (1965)). Gluttony – especially heavy consumption of meat, intoxication, sexual intercourse, loud music and dancing, were all prohibited during Lent, when the Christian subject was meant to turn inwards and contemplate his/her relationship to God. How many people actually held fast to this doctrine is an open question, but the festival of Carnival was a time when these prohibitions were not only relaxed, but indeed the reverse – hedonistic display – was allowed to occupy a public space. Carnival was a period when the world was metaphorically turned upside down: gender polarities were reversed, the poor dressed in the normally exclusive style and colours of the rich, the rich dressed as the destitute, merchants became jesters and clowns. A period of revelry encapsulated the Carnival, which then culminated in a parade through the streets of the town or city. Carnival occupies a liminal space between the risqué and the respectable.

Documentary evidence exists for the Trinidad Carnival from the early decades of the nineteenth century (Cowley 1996). The festival was

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introduced by French settlers in the eighteenth century; they brought with them the practice of masquerade on the Monday and Tuesday that marked the end of the Lenten season in Roman Catholic parts of Europe. These French settlers tended to be lenient to their slaves at Christmas and Carnival, allowing them some free time and even encouraging them to make their own masquerade bands. The black slaves inserted themselves into the turning-the-world-upside-down-for-a-day that was Carnival: they dressed in the cast-off clothing of their masters and whitened their faces. At the same time many whites portrayed the *Nègre Jardin* – the field slave or 'garden Negro' – in rags and blackface.

From the nineteenth century to the present, the Trinidad Carnival has been a space of cultural innovation and hybridisation, of political satire and protest, and lately of constitution of national identity (Hill 1972; Koningsbruggen 1997). These sedimented layers of politicised cultural formations would inevitably form a part of the cultural apparatus that the Trinidadian segment of the West Indian migration to Britain would bring with them in the post-war period.

The first officially documented encounter of British society with the Carnival tradition of Trinidad occurred with the arrival for the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) to perform at the festival of Britain in 1951 (Hill 1972). TASPO was a steel drum band, they introduced the British public to this new instrument and its distinctive sound. In informal spaces like their homes and parties ordinary Trinidadian migrants were also by this time re-articulating the cultural forms that had grown out of Carnival – like the calypso; those with artistic training and access to cultural apparatus in Britain were presenting the folk dances and drama from Trinidad and the wider Caribbean (Connor-Mogotsi 1995; Walmsley 1992).

The Trinidad Carnival has strongly influenced a number of newer Carnivals in the Caribbean and North America; its forms and practices are caught up in a process of globalisation which impacts on them (Koningsbruggen 1997; Manning 1990; Miller 1994), and on which they in turn impact – as seen for example in the work of Trinidadian costume designer Peter Minshall for the opening ceremonies of the 1994 World Cup and 1996 Olympics.[12] In his anthropological study of the Notting Hill Carnival, Cohen does not give sufficient consideration to the movement of people and ideas, as well as material artefacts, between the Caribbean and Britain. He argues that the Notting Hill Carnival is rooted in local struggles in the Notting Hill area and consequently, the West Indian domination of the festival is seen to come at a later stage (Cohen

12 Information on Minshall's work, including colour photographs of his creations for these ceremonies, can be found at his website: http://www.callaloo.co.tt/masbands/.

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1993). Cohen seems unaware that Carnival is a cultural form which Caribbean-heritage people took with them wherever they went in their post war Atlantic migrations. Astonishingly, considering he published in 1993, Cohen recycles the stereotypes about anomic black youth and cultural incompatibility that were a mainstay of the few early sociological and anthropological studies of blacks in Britain. Cohen's work on Carnival was disputed by my field informants.[13]

Michael La Rose, one of these field informants, recalled a relative in Trinidad sending the recordings of each year's calypso songs to the family in London. Peter Minshall, the best known Trinidadian costume designer, was an art student in London in the 1960s, and was instrumental in bringing out a costume band in the 1973 Notting Hill Carnival. Thousands of Trinidad-heritage Britons travel to Trinidad for its Carnival each year. Beyond this there could be said to exist a trans-Atlantic Carnival circuit: it starts with the Trinidad Carnival in February/March; moves up the Eastern Caribbean, then to Jamaica (where a Trinidad-style carnival was instituted by University students from Trinidad in the 1960s, and which co-exists with the long established festival parade of Jonkannu); then to Labor Day in New York, Caribana in Toronto, and Notting Hill in London. Trinidadian migrants, designers, musicians, and carnival groupies play an important role in all of these carnivals: to allow this is not to downplay the important local input in each, but rather to open a space for thinking the Trinidad-style Carnival as a globalised social/cultural form. The Rio Carnival is the world's biggest and best-known, but it is the Trinidad Carnival that has propagated itself through the contemporary English-speaking Atlantic world (Manning 1990).

In this paper I make frequent reference to the history and current practices of Carnival in Trinidad; this is justified because the Carnival band I worked with employs the Trinidad Carnival as a point of reference, both positive and negative, against which they formulate much of their praxis. The Trinidad Carnival is an important part of the ground against which the Peoples' War Carnival band articulates its figures, though it does not constitute the entire ground.

3. Biography: Sound System to Carnival Band[14]

The Peoples' War Carnival band was formed in 1983 by Michael and Keith La Rose. Both had by that time had a long involvement in the London music scene as DJs. Michael remembers, as a child, 'seeing

13 For alternative accounts see: Gutzmore (1978); Roussel-Milner (1996).

14 This section is based mainly on interviews I conducted with Michael La Rose in July and August of 1997; he was 41 years old at the time.

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people liming around a paraffin heater in the cold, listening to Sparrow'.[15] His grandfather always sent up the roadmarch[16] recording from the Trinidad Carnival. It was not until 1970 that Michael would go back to Trinidad, which he had left as a child, and there see the Carnival. In London, the La Rose boys were part of a milieu where Carnival traditions were being reconstituted: some people on his street in North London, who were related to his mother, brought out a band for the Notting Hill Carnival in the late 1960s; John La Rose – the father of Michael and Keith – used to take them and their friends to many of the events around carnival.

By 1973 Michael and his brother Keith were spending time at the Hibiscus club in Stoke Newington, North London, which was run by a Trinidadian. This club played all types of music because, according to Michael, 'Trinis [Trinidadians] listen to all music'. After some time Michael and his friends got a chance to try their hand at DJing, when the club's normal DJ fell ill. According to Michael:

> It was at this club that the first masquerade bands were planned and subsequently introduced to Notting Hill Carnival. The main Carnival organiser was Lesley Palmer or 'Teacher'. He convinced Lawrence Noel – a mas' maker – to bring a costume band to Notting Hill at the Hibiscus Club (personal communication with author, 28 February 1998).

It was at this time that the idea of putting a masquerade band on the streets of Notting Hill first occurred to Michael and Keith.

The issue of what type of music was to be played in the clubs and parties frequented by Caribbean-heritage youth divided Jamaicans from Trinidadians and others from the Southeast Caribbean. Michael recalls:

> there was a lot of strident Jamaican nationalism at the time, they tried to keep other types of music [apart from reggae] out of fetes, so we decided to bus' [bust or break] that, we wanted to listen to all types of music – calypsos, cadance and west African music; the Jamaican-only emphasis was false to ourselves and everything else.

Michael admits that his and Keith's inclusive approach to music was in a sense not in keeping with the dominant trends of Afro-Caribbean youth

15 'Liming' refers to a verb in Trinidadian English which means to spend time in a relaxed manner with friends; 'Sparrow' is the sobriquet of Francisco Slinger, one of the longest established Trinidadian calypso singers. C.L.R. James wrote of Sparrow that he was one of the foremost creative artists in the Caribbean, on par with Derek Walcott and Aime Cesaire (James 1980 (1961)).

16 The 'roadmarch' is the most popular calypso of the carnival Monday and Tuesday parade in Trinidad.

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culture in the 1970s. More than 60% of Afro-Caribbeans in Britain trace their roots to Jamaica; Jamaican speech patterns and popular music in the form of reggae were dominant at that time. This situation would impact on the Carnival. Michael again:

> black youth were attracted to Carnival not as a mas [masquerade] thing but as a place where a lot of black people could gather. The carnival movement failed to come to grips with the coming of these black youth – who were chauvinist to [i.e. against] calypso, but still wanted to be part of the Carnival; but it was those same youth who fought back and defeated the police in 1976.[17]

Around that time Michael and Keith decided to form their own sound system, which they named Peoples' War 'because we wanted to identify with some of the struggles against oppression that were going on around the world, like in South Africa, in the Caribbean, and here in Britain'. A sound system or 'sound' is a blending of equipment, records and operators that 'plays out' (i.e. provides music, usually for a fee) at clubs and parties. The sound system phenomenon had its origin in 1960s Jamaica (Hebdige 1987); a number of the famous Jamaican sounds sprung offshoots in Britain, and by the 1970s indigenous British sounds were part of the scene. The world of the sound system was loud, fast, and sometimes dangerous: agents of rival sounds would cut the cables of a system at a 'Blues dance'[18] in order to damage its reputation; occasionally the personnel of a sound would be physically attacked or 'bottled' – have beer bottles thrown at them. The element of danger was increased because the carrying of knives was very popular at this time, according to Michael. Peoples' War often found themselves up against Jamaican music chauvinism: on a few occasions they were threatened with violence for playing music other than reggae. Peoples' War survived, even though Michael recalls 'we had some rough times and a few close calls'.

Following is Michael's account of the formation and policy of Peoples' War Carnival band[19] (the conversation between Michael and

17 After a particularly oppressive police presence at the 1976 Carnival, so-called 'riots' erupted, in which groups of youth fought running battles with the police. There were numerous calls afterwards for the Carnival to be either moved to an enclosed area or banned altogether.

18 This type of event is an illegal party in a house where you paid to get in and where food and drink were sold without a licence.

19 The membership of the Peoples' War Carnival band currently comprises roughly 120 masqueraders, mostly young people, born in Britain of Caribbean or African heritage. The membership comes mainly from the London Boroughs of Camden, Hackney, Haringey, and Islington. In addition to the 120 or so masqueraders, there are other people associated with the band,

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myself took place at the Peoples' War Mas camp; the narrative picks up just after Michael was talking about his and his brother Keith's early venture into DJing):

> ...in the meantime [after an initial success playing music at a club] we decided to go on the road, we were with a band called Lion Youth, and they were our friends and they needed a music section and that was when we took the step of going onto a lorry. This was like the first proper sound system, rather than some guy wiring up two PA boxes, on top of a truck, music for a carnival band in Notting Hill. ... It was a very fraught and difficult time because it was new ground, nobody knew anything about it, nobody knew how to do it, it was hit and miss ... you know, the question of generators, the question of fluxes of power ... it was just a nightmare. And then there was the question of how do you play records on top of a moving truck ... that was a problem ... but we got through that carnival, I can't remember ... maybe '78 or '79 .... A couple years later we fell out with these people in the mas band, basically we weren't getting paid, and they got somebody else to play for them, this was about maybe four or five years down the road, so everybody knew how to do it now ... So we decided we're going to bring out a band. ... The basis of that decision was: first of all, a lot of people we brought, because we were playing out all over the place throughout the year, so we used to bring these people to carnival to the band. So that we felt we had a responsibility to the people who would come ...to us at carnival time, to bring out something ... so we brought out a T-shirt band;[20] then we had to decide what we were going to do next year, because it's a mas band we want to bring out, not a T-shirt band. But basically, I was saying that I didn't want to make a band that was going to be about butterflies, or fantasy; I wanted to make a band that said something, and I think I'd known enough about Carnival at that point to understand the roots of Carnival being that kind of commentative mas situation; and I was kind of disenchanted with what was happening in Trinidad at that time, but later on something else happened that would interest me again. I just didn't want to play pretty mas[21] – I just couldn't put my efforts into that, so I said, this is the type of band I want to make, and who was willing to come in with me on this. ... The other thing we thought was important was to explain what the themes were about, whatever constituency we had; one because we were trying to do something with the mas in that sense and first we felt that the only way

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mostly adults – parents of many of the young masqueraders; their presence was noticeable in the last stage of preparing for the 1997 presentation, and many were on the sidelines of the band's parade on August Bank Holiday, keeping an eye on their kids and generally lending a hand.

20 A T-shirt band is one where the masqueraders all wear T-shirts with the same or related emblems or designs; it is a relatively cheap and easy way to put a band onto the road for Carnival.

21 'Pretty mas' refers to a masquerade which is intended mainly or solely for its visual impact; the notion contrasts with 'serious mas' – a masquerade intended to convey a social or political commentary. I shall discuss the contrast more fully in the concluding section.

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> young black people would, could relate to masquerade – I told you these chauvinisms that existed – was if they understood that it means something, and can say something about their condition here.

Making a political statement is an important part of how Peoples' War seeks to present itself.[22] According to a 1997 Press Release put out by the band:

> The band prides itself on its themes of social commentary and satire. Peoples' War Carnival band makes masquerade that 'says something'. We believe that Carnival masquerade should make a statement. We make 'Radical Mas" (from a Peoples' War Press Release).

A partial list of the band's masquerade themes for previous presentations is as follows:

'Come What may We're Here to Stay';
'None but Ourselves (Black Heroes)';
'There's Something Wrong in Paradise';
'No, Don't Stop De Carnival; Carnival of Resistance';
'Victory at Cuito Cuanavale: Free South Africa!';
'Sparrow's "Jean and Dinah"';
'Black is ... A celebration of civilisations, inventors, music, leaders and culture Part I & II';
'Caribbean Festival; We Ting!';
'Haiti, Let Freedom Rain';
'Untold Stories'.

Anti-racism is evoked in 'None but ourselves', and 'Black is'; anti-imperialism is evoked in 'Victory at Cuito Cuanavale', and assertion of the culture of the Trinidad Carnival is connoted by 'Jean and Dinah'.[23] Resistance is a trope that is spread across the themes. The themes suggest, and were meant to suggest, according to Michael, a critical awareness of social and economic problems in Britain and beyond. Peoples' War Carnival band can be said to wear its politics on its sleeves, and quite deliberately so.

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22 The Time Out Guide to the 1997 Notting Hill Carnival lists 42 masquerade bands as appearing for that year's parade. Each entry gives the name of the band, its theme for the current year, a list of the sections, the name of the band leader, the number of players, and a short paragraph of commentary. The comment for Peoples' War reads: 'A less political theme than usual, the band this year celebrates musical styles from the African diaspora' (p 67).

23 'Victory at Cuito Cuanavale' refers to a battle in Angola in 1985, where a combined Cuban/Angolan force defeated the South African Defence Force. 'Jean and Dinah' is the title of a calypso roadmarch hit by Sparrow.

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Discussion

Michael La Rose's ideology and praxis of cultural activism draws upon a number of sources. One is his early exposure to and later involvement in the political work of his parents and their circle of associates. Both of Michael's parents were quite active politically, with roots in progressive and anti-colonialist projects in Trinidad and Venezuela; they both continued to be politically involved after moving to Britain. They were involved in some of the earliest attempts by West Indians to organise themselves politically in Britain (Lloyd 1985; Walmsley 1992). The parents actively encouraged Michael and Keith to take part in political projects and even to formulate and implement their own, like the Black Youth Movement. The parents and their circle provided a political apprenticeship for Michael. Another source of Michael's ideology of resistance is the black consciousness movement that made itself felt in Britain in the 1960s as it did in North America and the Caribbean.[24]

Both Michael and his brother Keith grew up with a strong sense of their Trinidadian roots – the London family kept up its connections with the Trinidadian branches through movement of people, books and records. Trinidadian and South Eastern Caribbean[25] identity was, however, a problem for many young persons of Caribbean but not Jamaican heritage in the 1970s because black youth culture was increasingly defined and expressed through symbols and forms rooted in Jamaican music and speech.[26] The tension of having the Trinidadian part of his identity excluded from the spaces where black youth listened to popular music was felt strongly by Michael, as is inscribed in his personal narrative. Faced with the choice of either assimilating into a generic Jamaican-influenced youth culture or resisting, Michael chose to resist. This choice was made feasible because of the cultural capital Michael was able to draw upon in the form of his parents' political work, his kinship connections in Britain and Trinidad, and not least of all his time as a pupil at the George Padmore Supplementary School.[27]

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24 From a talk by Michael La Rose at the George Padmore Institute, London, 12 May 1997.

25 From Barbados, Antigua, Grenada, St Kitts, Dominica, St Lucia, St Vincent and Guyana.

26 The same held true about national identity for others from the Southeast Caribbean – Barbados, Grenada etc.

27 The Padmore school was set up in 1968 by Michael's parents as a counter to a tendency of British schools to label Afro-Caribbean pupils as Educationally Sub Normal (ESN). The Padmore school met on Saturdays, giving lessons on the standard curriculum as well as presenting material on Caribbean, Asian and African history (Interviews with John La Rose and Irma La Rose, London,

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The Peoples' War sound system asserted a diverse black identity by playing a wide range of black Diaspora music: calypso, reggae, rhythm and blues, soul, cadance, hi-life. At the same time it countered the hegemony of Jamaican music in the space of black youth culture by playing music from the Southeast Caribbean, Brazil and West Africa. Peoples' War Sound simultaneously supported *and* critiqued the constitution of black youth culture in London in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The Peoples' War Carnival band sought to give public expression to ideas of anti-racism, anti-imperialism and, like its namesake sound system, to evoke a black Diaspora identity. The space for this was the Notting Hill Carnival, an annual event where Caribbean-heritage Britons reproduced and transformed the Trinidad-derived Carnival tradition in the contested space they occupied in the new country. As with the sound system, here again Peoples' War's intervention is both supportive of *and* critical of the wider cultural form – Carnival in this case – in which they take part: the Carnival band, by its very presence in the Notting Hill Carnival, supports the public expression of a distinctive Caribbean-heritage identity; at the same time, it sought to put a political spin on its masquerade by making 'serious' as opposed to 'pretty'[28] portrayals.

This dichotomy may be usefully thought in terms of the Apollinian/Dionysian contrast made by Nietzsche in his discussion of aesthetics (Nietzsche 1967 (1886, 1888): 33ff): 'pretty mas' would seem to spring from a Dionysian drive to revelry and forgetting of the self in the pleasure of the event, while 'serious mas' resonates well with the Apollinian state of contemplation. The dichotomy between the pretty and the serious in its starkest form is clearly ideal-typical – nonetheless it is an important one in the Trinidad-derived carnival; adherents to either position will argue at length about the worth of a particular band, even though in a sense they are arguing about two different approaches to masquerade. Some designers of carnival bands have attempted to articulate both emphases (Koningsbruggen 1997; Miller 1994). Those who make serious mas often accuse makers of pretty mas of being commercial sell-outs. The dichotomy also manifests itself in the music of carnival, as a distinction between 'serious' calypso, with social commentary in the lyrics, as against 'wining', 'party' or 'jump' Soca – high tempo dance calypso. As shown by Rohlehr, the debate over these

April – July 1997). There was considerable growth in supplementary schools among blacks in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s (Carter 1986; John 1986).

28 Michael, on reading an early draft of this paper, suggested that 'reality' could be a synonym for 'serious, and 'fantasy' for 'pretty' (personal communication, 28 February, 1998).

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emphases goes back to the nineteenth century for calypso in Trinidad (Rohlehr 1990).[29] The two emphases exist in a structural relationship with each other – the one is meaningful to the extent that it can be shown to contrast with the other.

Students of the black Diaspora have frequently utilised a notion of contrasting value orientations to account for the hybrid or Creolised character of many social and cultural forms found there. Wilson posited a value orientation ranging from 'reputation' – male and outdoor-oriented – to 'respectability' – female, home-based, concerned with propriety; he saw these contrasting orientations as characteristic of Afro-Caribbean society as a whole (Wilson 1973). Abrahams drew upon this notion in his work on public speech-making and other forms of oral performance among blacks in North America and the Caribbean (Abrahams 1983), pointing out that such events give stylised expression to underlying social and moral tensions – an idea that owes much to Turner's conceptualisation of the social drama as being expressive of conflict at the level of deep structure (Turner 1974).

Wilson's reputation/respectability dichotomy is perhaps too strict, and Abrahams, in concentrating on the 'man-of-words', overlooked the rich oral-performative culture of Afro-American and black Caribbean women. Two recent ethnographies of Trinidad Carnival have questioned the correspondence of women to the transcendent/respectable pole of the dichotomy (Koningsbruggen 1997; Miller 1994). Miller has sought to rethink value conflict in Trinidadian society by utilising the notions of transience and transcendence, which would roughly relate to Wilson's reputation and respectability. Miller advances over Wilson in that his contrasting concepts work both synchronically *and* diachronically: he shows how, at a given point in time, Christmas festivity in Trinidad expresses a transcendent orientation toward time, while Carnival revelry expresses a transient orientation; and he uses the contrast to help explain how Christmas and Carnival in Trinidad have come to assume their current forms. Like Koningsbruggen, Miller averts the danger of making too-close a connection between women and the respectable/transcendent sphere: for both ethnographers, their fieldwork on Trinidad Carnival highlighted the spaces which women had opened for themselves in the transient/reputation-oriented sphere, especially as

29 Cooper has discussed this dichotomy for Jamaican popular music as an opposition of 'slackness' – the raunchy and rough dancehall style, to 'culture' – socially critical lyrical reggae best exemplified in the music of Bob Marley; Cooper sees the one as always implicated in the other (Cooper 1993).

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masqueraders.[29] I believe the distinction between serious and pretty mas, as made by Michael La Rose, to be related to the same structures of feeling from which emerge value conflicts over reputation vs. respectability or transience vs. transcendence. What would have to be further investigated is the extent to which these structures are characteristic of the black Diaspora, and more specifically from the point of view of this paper, whether and to what extent they were part of the 'cultural baggage' which Caribbean migrants brought with them to Britain.

By making 'radical mas', by emphasising the serious side of mas over the pretty side, Peoples' War critiques what they see as a secular tendency toward commercialism and empty frivolity in the Carnival.[31] The 1997 presentation of Peoples' War, 'United in Riddim. Music of the African Diaspora' evoked a pan-Caribbean and pan-African vision in its stylised presentation of the music and national emblems of several Caribbean countries, and of a generalised West Africa. The presentation tried to strike a working balance between pretty and serious mas: on the one hand the costumes were pleasing to look at, and the music played for the parade was dance-oriented; on the other, the colours of the costumes and the small national flags emblazoned on them and from which the colours themselves were reproduced, were metonyms of the places from whence came Britain's contemporary black populations. The costumes embodied both the memory of the earlier home and the expression of distinctiveness of black Britons in the new home.[32]

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30 On this point Miller's paper on the wining of Trinidadian women as an expression of Hegelian absolute freedom in Trinidad is intriguing (Miller 1991).

31 Michael himself feels so strongly about making serious mas that he on several occasions told me he was prepared to withdraw altogether from Carnival activities if the event became fully commercialised.

32 Michael's political intervention into the Carnival takes another form apart from the Peoples' War band: in 1989 he was part of a group that started the Association for a Peoples Carnival (APC), which seeks to criticise the existing arrangements of the carnival, to make public participation and that of masqueraders more enjoyable, and to have some of the revenue generated by the event channelled into supporting masquerade bands and steelbands. The APC are advocating the preservation of more traditional (i.e. rooted in Trinidadian carnival) aspects of Carnival, like steelbands and masquerade bands, in the face of the growing presence of giant concert-type sound stages catering to a taste for forms of popular music like garage and techno which draw a different audience from that for steelbands and masquerade. For Michael, part of the APC struggle is to 'gain a cut of the financial benefits of the inevitable commercialism of Carnival, and to strengthen the Carnival cultural elements and to repay those who sacrificed and struggled to establish the Carnival' (Personal communication, 28 February, 1998).

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The 1997 presentation of Peoples' War sought a dialectical overcoming of the opposition between serious and pretty mas. Whilst the band's leadership's agenda is overtly political in the sense of articulating notions of anti-imperialism, anti-racism and a secular black Diaspora identity – and thus oriented to serious mas – it also consciously draw on the hedonistic side of Carnival. Peoples' War tried to articulate 'pretty' elements with their serious 1997 presentation. They are attempting to politicise Carnival masquerade in Notting Hill, a space where the pretty or hedonistic side of Carnival is predominant over the serious side. The praxis of Peoples' War is congruent with the ethnographic findings of Miller and Koningsbruggen for the Trinidad Carnival, who found that contrasting and even conflicting value orientations co-existed in that Carnival. Serious mas could be seen to be oriented toward a transcendent temporal notion in that it tries to say something about the past and to imagine a future; pretty mas can be thought of as transient because it is grounded in the pleasure of the moment, where past and future are less important than the immediate gratification of the revelry. Peoples' War articulate contrasting orientations of serious and pretty mas in expressing their identity as black people in contemporary Britain.

Michael La Rose's personal narrative inscribes two lines of resistance: one to racist domination as experienced by blacks in Britain, and the other to the hegemony of Jamaican popular cultural forms in the life-world of black youth in 1970s Britain. The Peoples' War sound system and Carnival band were projects through which Michael and others like-minded sought to make concrete these two lines of resistance. In the development of the Carnival band and sound system we see C. Wright Mill's triangle of personal troubles, social problems and history coming together. Michael's involvement in the transient form of Carnival exists interactively with his transcendent political vision of a post-racist Britain.

To come back to the questions with which I opened this paper, concentration on the visible forms of black youth cultural activity does obscure the actions of the older members of the community, and more to the point, it overlooks cultural-political projects that have been planned and implemented over the long term, of which Peoples' War is one. The still-influential view that blacks in Britain (and the New World) live in a state of social anomie and with fragmented culture is a mistaken one. Britain's black population has formed and work with complex, sometimes contradictory, and often potent forms of cultural capital in shaping and re-shaping their identities (Alexander 1996; Alibhai-Brown 1997; Hall 1996 (1989)). The Carnival, of Trinidadian origin, as re-imagined and reconstituted in Britain, is one element of that capital. The cultural capitals (for it may make most sense to use the term in the

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plural) of Black Britons comprises far more than the dreadlocks, reggae music,[33] and street corner style of black youth so beloved of the British press and proponents of cultural studies of contemporary Britain (who should know better). The case I have presented here suggests that black Britons, exemplified by Peoples' War, have got more than social problems, and their political and cultural activity consists in more than reacting to instances of racism in the wider society by expressing resistance in song, dance and dress, even though these are not insignificant in their habitus. In the case of Peoples' War, there exists alongside the transient visible expressive forms of masquerade and black music, a transcendent political vision of counter-hegemony, one that draws upon the ideas and experience of several generations of black activism in Britain. Black youth, influential and obviously visible as they are, are not the vanguard of black cultural and political expression in Britain: they are just one constitutive element thereof. The correct questions must be posed to black cultural and political activity in Britain, questions which are aware that culture is as much about routes as it is about roots.

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33 The parodied figure, in the popular British media, of the happy dreadlocked man bopping to reggae music elides the complex and even contradictory world view that is contemporary Rastafarianism (Chevannes 1994). And, as any young black in Brixton will point out, not every dread is a rasta, and vice versa.

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