

Resistance, Oil, and Awakening: Textual Responses to the Butler Strike and Its Aftermath

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Abstract: The 1937 Trinidad oil field labor uprising, commonly known as the Butler Strike, has come to be seen as a watershed moment in the nation's history by the various poets and prose writers, indigenous and exogenous, who have sought to represent and define Trinidad as a place. Collectively, they present a broad conceptual range of Uriah Butlers (the strike's leader or figure-head), as well as the events associated with his name. Their individual articulations of the Butler strike are conditioned by their overriding aesthetic projects, genres of choice, political ideologies, and subject positions. This paper argues that while there is no definitive textual Butler Strike, the ways that the strike and its major players are represented keenly evince authors' ideas regarding Trinidad's emerging postcolonial identity, *Négritude*/black power, and the confluences of class, racial, and anti-colonial struggle. From C.L.R. James' would-be proletariat hero hampered by religious zealotry to Eric Roach's Toussaint l'Ouverture *manqué* and V.S. Naipaul's racial fanatic adrift in large historical currents he cannot successfully navigate or comprehend, Butler and the struggle he embodies are enduring subjects through which authors seek to comprehend in historical and cultural terms the complexities and contradictions of late colonial and early postcolonial Trinidad.

Keywords: Butler Strike; black nationalism; Trinidadian nationalism; proletarian literature; oil

Some of the most transformative of twentieth-century historical currents sprang from the world's petroleum fields. Epochal changes to human settlement patterns, global environmental dynamics, and labor relations flowed from the oil wells of both the industrial and developing worlds. Such was the case in regions commonly associated with petroleum extraction, such as the Middle East, as well as others less popularly imagined in these terms. The Trinidad oil workers' strike of 1937, commonly known as the Butler Riots,¹ was one of those watershed historio-cultural occurrences in which the intersection and outward radiance of a set of cultural vectors forever transform the social dynamics of a given place. In part, it was a manifestation of the spirit of the Radical Thirties, that cresting period of organized labor resistance to the industrial ownership class during a period of rampant economic hardship. At the same time, it shared a common impulse with the contemporaneous *Négritude* movement that coalesced in France around the likes of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, and thus anticipated the black power movements of the later twentieth century. But perhaps even more significantly, the strike marked one of the earliest sparks of anti-colonialist agitation in the Caribbean, opening the way for successive stages of decolonization and helping to fuel the emergence of a distinctive Trinidadian literature that lent the island a sense of national identity and cultural legitimacy. As Laurence Breiner notes, it brought about Trinidad's very political awakening; to this day Trinidad celebrates Labor Day on 19 June, the day the oil field unrest broke out (Anthony 92). Nonetheless, despite the rich cultural multivalence and hefty consequences of the Butler Strike, there has been little effort by literary and cultural studies scholars to analyze the considerable body of work that has sought to make sense of it.

Doing so first involves taking into account what happened in and around Trinidad at the time of the strike. The 1930s were a period of considerable social unrest in the Caribbean, with labor uprisings breaking out in Jamaica in 1935 and 1938 and Barbados in 1937,² though the Butler Strike was, unlike the other clashes, industrial in nature, and arguably had a greater set of aftereffects. Petroleum had become an invaluable global commodity, thanks to the rapid proliferation of auto-

mobile manufacturing and the near-total mechanization of the major world military powers, then in the process of gearing up for what blossomed into World War II. Oil-rich, underdeveloped countries such as Venezuela, Persia/Iran, and Trinidad had within the previous two decades taken on immense economic importance, attracting for the first time forms of industrial employment with the establishment of oil fields. However, as writers such as Abdul Rahman Munif and Upton Sinclair have documented, oil field labor conditions tended to be very poor, and the remunerative inequality between native rank-and-file workers and the foreign managers and engineers who oversaw drilling operations staggered and galled the workers. The Trinidadian oil industry gradually emerged between 1900 and 1920, financed by foreign capital and manned at the rank-and-file level by 4,046 locals (Millette 67). World War I and the presence of the oil industry brought on massive price inflation of consumer goods; this, coupled with the stingy compensation of oilfield workers, meant that their real wages (adjusted for cost of living) were actually less than those of their ancestors who worked on the Trinidadian sugar plantations in the wake of emancipation a century earlier (Millette 70-72). With the hardships brought on by the economic depression of the 1930s and the dawning sense of Trinidadian nationalism concomitant with the emergence, in the same decade, of a generation of young anti-imperialist native intellectuals like C.L.R. James and Albert Gomes (Neptune 19-23), the complex of social and economic relations that constituted Trinidadian society began to experience considerable structural strain. Kevin Yelvington observes that a growing sense of black nationalist racial consciousness, stimulated by fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, exacerbated this strain. By 1935, Trinidadian oil workers' resentment toward their employers reached such an impasse that demonstrations began to break out. World War I veteran Tubal Uriah Butler, then representing the Trinidad Labor Party led by popular white creole Captain Arthur Cipriani, garnered immense public respect by leading a hunger march at the Apex Oilfields in the southwest corner of the country. Butler was a Baptist preacher of Grenadian origin whose firsthand experience of the hardships of the Trinidadian oil workers, from whose rural ranks he emerged and drew his power, made him increas-

ingly politicized throughout the 1930s (Thomas et al. 61). He spoke with a “rhetoric culled from socialist vocabulary, with biblical phrases and images, and appeals to African race consciousness” (61) so zealously that historian and first prime minister of post-independence Trinidad Eric Williams described him as “a queer political concoction of God, Marx, and the British Empire” (qtd. in Sewell 22). He rose quickly as a political leader; he founded the British Empire Workers’ and Citizens’ Homerule Party in 1936 and spoke out so militantly against low wages and unemployment that he was arrested in May 1937. The following month the oil workers of Trinidad went on strike and the police tried to arrest Butler again, causing the already simmering tension to erupt into months of severe civil unrest and violence which eventually claimed the lives of forty-six people (Samaroo),³ including police officer Charlie King who was burned alive and, shortly thereafter, raised to the status of folk hero. The Butler Strike, which was unprecedented in Trinidad in that it brought together black and Indian workers (Brereton and Yelvington 20), brought production to a standstill and held the country on the brink of social collapse as it expanded beyond the oil fields into a general strike. British warships were deployed to the island and thousands were arrested and prosecuted, including Butler, who was sentenced to two years of prison for sedition.⁴ Faced with repressive opposition and bereft of organized leadership, the labor unrest died down and then ceased completely with the outbreak of World War II and the inroads of American cultural hegemony that came with the introduction of United States military bases to the island. The strike did, however, result in legal recognition of unions in Trinidad and the establishment of collective bargaining. This political improvement was due mainly to the conciliatory policy the British adopted to secure Trinidad’s oil with World War II looming on the horizon (Thomas et al. 73–74, 168). Beyond this, the strike’s aftereffects continued to resonate culturally, for instance, in fundamentally calling into question the legitimacy of British imperial rule (Neptune 42). The strike also inspired numerous textual efforts to come to terms with the full import of the events of 1937.

Writers from both Trinidad and the larger British Commonwealth have been captivated by the Butler Strike and have grappled with the

ways in which it radically altered the spaces and culture of Trinidad and the broader region. The labor turmoil in Trinidad coincided with the later phases of what scholars term the Trinidad Renaissance, a moment of flourishing textual production—thanks to influential local literary magazines *Trinidad* (1929–30) and *The Beacon* (1931–33, 1939)—and movement towards an organic, telltale national literary voice (Sander 9). As Selwyn R. Cudjoe observes in his *Resistance and Caribbean Literature*, the writers of this period participated in a simultaneously collective and individual movement of self-discovery and furthered the drive toward national self-government (138). Along with the writers of the Trinidad Renaissance, fellow commentators from the wider Commonwealth helped forge the earliest historical discursive formulations of these pivotal events. Driven by the intellectual engagement with class struggle and widespread cultural interest in travel writing centered on “far-flung” locations so prominent within the zeitgeist of the 1930s, these writers also responded to the strike in its immediate aftermath and helped to process its significance for an international audience. A generation or more later, a new set of Caribbean writers took up the Butler Strike in its *longue durée* in light of Trinidad’s violent civil strife in the 1970s and 1980s and the cultural preoccupations unleashed by the later twentieth-century postcolonial turn. Among the most incisive of the former were C.L.R. James, Arthur Calder-Marshall, and Ralph de Boissière; among the latter, Eric Roach and V.S. Naipaul.⁵ For writers from elsewhere in the British Commonwealth, such as Calder-Marshall, the strike provided an opportunity to explore the aspirations and dissatisfaction of British colonial subjects during the waning days of empire. For native Caribbean writers for whom, as Nana Wilson-Tagoe asserts, “history can be both a nightmare and a challenge; a nightmare if his or her relation to it remains imprisoned in the fixed relations and attitudes of the region’s linear past [including slavery and colonialism]; a challenge if he or she exploits the artist’s freedom to endow history and experience with meanings and explore other areas of experience beyond the rational linear order” (4), these historical events could be sounded out, interpreted, and creatively reconfigured so as to forge the way towards a different future via rethinking the past (Wilson-Tagoe 37).

But for James, the historian and radical social theorist who began his rise to prominence as a major West Indian intellectual force in the years just prior to the Butler Strike, the events of 1937 had to be interpreted when they were barely removed from front page news. At the end of his *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938), written as the workers of Trinidad were marching and giving voice to their collective grievances, James reflects on the social strife sweeping his native island and frames it in orthodox Marxist terms. *A History of Negro Revolt* presents a lineage of collective resistance of African-descended peoples against their European and American oppressors from the slavery era to the colonial period. In ending his study with a consideration of the revolutionary upheavals breaking out in Trinidad, the Gold Coast, and Rhodesia at the time of the book's inception James illustrates how the scope of this resistance broadened in his time and took on an anti-imperialist and pro-labor bent. In order to stress the proletarian aspect of the Trinidadian revolt, James downplays race as a divisive factor in local affairs: "Racial prejudice and discrimination, though by no means abolished, have gradually declined. . . . The real difficulty of the West Indies is the poverty of the masses" (74). In a similar vein, he stresses the Indianness of pivotal labor leader Adrian Rienzi to downplay the historical conflict in Trinidad between blacks and Indians, and he predicts that "racial feeling will gradually take a less prominent part in the struggle than hitherto, for the Negro middle-classes are already aligning themselves and making the issue clear. They are with the whites. Industrialization has been the decisive factor here" (80). In simplifying the complex interplay of racial, cultural, and class-based tensions underlying the Trinidadian conflict, James sidesteps one of the stickier issues facing Marxist social analysis: that the superstructural social construct of race can at times be a more fundamental, decisive factor than the substructural relations between class groups. That is, in downplaying the role of race relations, James advances a fairly unproblematic vision of social reform and contestation based solely upon economic relations and interests.

Because of this ideological slant, James apprehends the figure of Butler (passingly) in decidedly bittersweet terms. He lauds Butler as a revolutionary leader but holds him at a distance due to the admixture

of proletarian and religious zealotry with which he carried out his efforts. James calls Butler “an agitator with a religious *bias*” and writes that his “career, *despite his religion*, is identical with many revolutionaries in Western Europe” (77; emphasis added). James views Butler’s religion, his attachment to that “opiate of the masses,” as a cause for embarrassment that threatened to compromise Butler’s actions and, by extension, the larger movement associated with his name.

While James observed the events of 1937 as an expatriate living in London, Briton Calder-Marshall, leftist associate of Malcolm Lowry and Graham Greene, observed the upheaval firsthand and published his analysis in *Glory Dead* (1939), a part travelogue, part political economic analysis of Trinidad during that period. Calder-Marshall sees the case of Trinidad as an embodiment of the colonial world during the era of the waning British Empire. He writes:

Trinidad itself is a small island. In world affairs it is not of great importance. But the problems which arise in Trinidad arise everywhere in the world where there is white domination of subject races. It is the problem of Great Britain in the West Indies, in Africa and India. It is the problem of the United States in the Black Belt, in Puerto Rico and Hawaii. (12)

For Calder-Marshall this problem consists of gross material inequalities, the kind of poorly developed infrastructure that would later be termed underdevelopment, and the rule of the local population by exogenous administrators of a different racial and cultural derivation. He presents the Butler strike as the product of intolerable material conditions, particularly squalid housing and a rapid increase in the cost of living (98, 227). The strike failed to bring about more sweeping changes in Trinidadian society, he postulates, because of an insufficient level of zeal on the part of the workers and a lack of sophisticated organization and leadership. In Calder-Marshall’s estimation, Butler was more of a “figurehead” or “patron saint” than a real labor leader (228, 235); he inspired quasi-religious utopian pipedreams of a better world both during the strike and, afterward, from prison, but his role in shaping collective action had been minimal. This impression of Butler is conveyed the first

time he is mentioned in Calder-Marshall's text. A shabby, impoverished man speaks of Butler like one foretelling the second coming of Christ: "De name of Uriah Butler shall live in Treeneedahd till perpetuity. . . . All de wide worl' over, dat day they hear of Treeneedahd and Uriah Butler, his glorious name" (46). Later in the text Calder-Marshall ruminates on the almost solely symbolic importance of Butler: "He had no direct contact with the majority of workers who had struck in other industries. He had been the mouth of the people, but that mouth was silent. He remained a figurehead, the symbol of an oppressed class" (228). However, while he stresses the need for intellectually-driven labor organization, Calder-Marshall concedes the utility of such a figurehead: "A Mouth. A Symbol. These things are necessary. But equally important are the planning brain and coordinating limbs" (228). Calder-Marshall concludes that Butler was "a popular martyr," a "patron saint" who served as a focalizing agent vis-a-vis the wishes and dissatisfactions of the Trinidad workers, but he functioned wholly on a level of myth and fancy rather than on the field of concrete action and strategization (228, 235). Here Calder-Marshall runs up against perhaps the most central dilemma in revolutionary politics, that raised by Marx in his *18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* and Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*: what sort of leader can a marginalized class produce, and what sort of leadership role can or should be taken on by one coming from outside the class he or she seeks to represent? Marx famously claimed that peasant workers are "incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name. . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (124), while Gramsci countered that effective revolutionary leadership must come from within the social group to be led and proceed from "organic intellectuals" intimately familiar with the terms of existence of the oppressed class (137). In his dismissive comments on Butler and, elsewhere, on the common people of Trinidad, Calder-Marshall places little stock in their ability to orient themselves politically and thus implies, like Marx, that direction for any concerted sort of social reform will have to come from the outside.⁶

While Calder-Marshall blames the absence of effective leadership for the strike's failure to produce more sweeping reforms, he also blames the

repressive authoritarian measures enacted by Trinidad's ownership class. They used, he observes, the country's police—driven by anti-Communist paranoia and recruited mostly from Trinidad's black population, so as to mask the racial character of the power structure at play—to sow violence among demonstrations and imprison the movement's central figures (215–17). They censored popular cultural forms like calypso music, causing songwriters to shift their focus to the totalitarian regimes of 1930s Europe as a means of obliquely commenting upon the totalitarianism of their own society (167). Finally, less subtly, oil field managers armed themselves with rifles and machine guns in preparation for the labor uprisings they anticipated (221).

In the face of these repressions and the future conflicts they signal, Calder-Marshall draws the overriding lesson of his text: the necessity of colonial reform. With economic and caste-based interest skewing the actions of the colonial government and ninety percent of the population sharing in the oppositional sentiment Butler voiced, Calder-Marshall calls on the British government to step in and bring about radical changes in Trinidad (286). He reminds his readers that the likes of Butler and labor leader Adrian Rienzi may be imprisonable individuals, but they speak to the shared dissatisfactions of a much wider population. Moreover, Trinidad is a microcosm of the wider British Empire, beginning to chafe under the proverbial colonial yoke. Britain's colonial situation is basically untenable, Calder-Marshall concludes, and the "mother country" would do best to begin drastic reforms in this corner of its empire.

Most Trinidadian writers of the time agreed with this basic sentiment. As Patricia Joan Saunders argues, the Butler Strike helped birth resistance narratives and establish the novel—with its themes of inter-gender and inter-class alliance—as a Trinidadian literary genre, while adding impetus to the country's nationalist movement (45–47). In fact, Ralph de Boissière's *Crown Jewel* (1952), which Clifford Sealy calls Trinidad's "most important political novel" (qtd. in Sander 119), was born of its author's experiences participating in the strike and offers an unparalleled perspective on the strike's role in the development of class and national consciousness in the country. First published more than a decade

after the strike, with de Boissière having immigrated to Australia and joined the Communist Party, *Crown Jewel* begins with a prologue that situates its fictionalized narrative of the strike in over three centuries of European exploitation of Trinidad and its people, from Columbus's "discovery" of the island, through the slavery era, up to 1935, at which point generations of cultural devaluation and thwarted attempts at social advancement had resulted in frustration and self doubt. Greed and dreaming stand out prominently in de Boissière's capsule history: dreams of a better life among Trinidad's oppressed, but also dreams, embodied in the reference to El Dorado at the end of the prologue, of fabulous wealth and power that led the Spanish and then the English to colonize the island. The novel's title points to Trinidad as the crown jewel of the British empire and as a place defined by the jewels or stars—longings for affluence or aristocracy, or for a more egalitarian society—that led its people through the night of conflict and strife: "[T]he stars, unveiled, would shine like those jewels in the El Dorado of dead men's dreaming" (de Boissière 3).

But in the face of the oppression recounted in the prologue and throughout the narrative proper, *Crown Jewel* focuses on the necessity of collective struggle in order to attain these aspirations. The novel's first chapter begins with a symbolically laden image of laborers struggling to move a cart full of timber. They are only able to successfully manipulate the heavy load by moving together as one, guided by a strong and experienced helmsman, just as throughout its length the novel demonstrates the vital necessity of workers banding together as a class under effective leadership in order to achieve a more egalitarian society. Joe, a middle-class character who later dramatizes how power can steer a would-be labor leader down a path of compromise and bourgeois class consciousness, gives voice to this early in the novel: "The most urgent necessity now is the formation of trade unions in all branches of industry . . . do you know what really is the trouble with us, do you want me to tell you? The lack of means to bring the progressive forces together" (28–29). Shortly thereafter, the personal magnetism and selflessness of labor leader Ben Le Maitre are presented as having the capacity to unite in this desired way. When Le Maitre speaks, his words bring the assem-

bled workers together like a body of water; afterwards, they disperse into individual “rivulets and streams” (47). The novel posits that the possibilities of such a collectivizing movement are historically contingent. In Trinidad collectivizing movements were born of the experience of fighting for Britain in World War I and returning to marginalization and underdevelopment in a colonized land upon demobilization. Equally, the novel poses this act of collectivization as contingent upon the emergence of Boisson, a figure based closely on the historical figure of Captain Cipriani, from this same conflict as a white leader willing to stand up for workers of all colors (85). Historical permutations of this sort and the popular movements they enable, for *Le Maitre*, are on the workers’ side, while arrayed against them are the forces of armed repression: “[T]heir guns against our history” (355). Andre, the novel’s disaffected bourgeois intellectual, comes to realize that to confront this dialectic alone rather than as part of an organized collective is to risk being swept up in tides stronger than an individual’s ability to stay afloat. “You can’t challenge everything,” he muses with his upper-class love interest, Gwenneth. “That’s a force greater than us. I don’t want to be flotsam” (174).

But in order for this indispensable collectivity to coalesce, the text suggests, the common identity that the Butler Strike helped to produce must emerge. The novel depicts the internalization of colonialism which, at its extreme, produces the sort of mimic men that Homi K. Bhabha discusses in *The Location of Culture*. Andre decries this cultural imperialism and the role of Trinidad’s British upper class in perpetuating it:

[E]very day you lord it over us, here, Africa, India. You hold us in contempt, you bomb us, you bayonet us, you suck us dry. You keep the top jobs. You educate us to despise and fear ourselves, to fall down before you, to speak with your accent. We go abroad to study and come back squeaking with the accents of governors and heads of departments. Those who do that are neither Englishmen nor West Indians, they’re less than men—apes, puppets! (de Boissière 216)

In the same spirit, Andre also proclaims the necessity of a stronger sense of West Indian identity to counterbalance this oppressive

ersatz Britishness: “Independence of mind—that’s what we need. . . . Independence of spirit. The courage to think like West Indians, to be proud of being West Indians” (104). The narrative explores one possible method for achieving this goal through Cassie, the increasingly resolute and class-conscious young woman who takes a leadership role among the strikers. Cassie turns to Shango, a West African religious practice found in residual form throughout the Caribbean, to locate a cultural fulcrum outside of European hegemony, a rallying point to achieve agency in order to resist colonial and bourgeois exploitation:

It was a cult the slaves had brought from Africa. It had come to be known as Shango, a misspelling of Chango, son of Ob, who was but one of many great gods. . . . Feeling now the need to win a measure of mastery over those forces in life that were rolling her back and forth as the waves roll pebbles on the beach, [Cassie] attended a Shango meeting in John-John village and shared in the sacrifice. (120-21)

While the text is careful to cast aspersions on any supernatural efficacy of Shango—Cassie goes to a ceremony to protect her lover Popito, only to see him killed while they are on their way home from it—Shango introduces the possibility of finding space for resistance in the traditions of alternative (that is, non-British) forms of cultural practice.

However, the formation of identities that can be used to contest marginalization and oppression do not occur only along nationalistic lines in the text. As previously noted, Cassie and other characters experience the dawning of greater senses of proletarian class-consciousness over the course of the narrative. Shortly before his arrest, Le Maitre gives voice to the need to combine anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle: “We need a philosophy to make our people conscious of their strength. . . . Once they are conscious of their strength they will stand up to the boss, they will fight colonialism” (292). In staying close to historical events, *Crown Jewel* narrates only the inception of this awakening, not its growth and culmination. In so doing, however, it highlights arguably the chief legacy of the Butler Strike: its giving of form and strength to the Trinidad labor movement and a growing sense of Trinidadian national identity.

Though the text conceives of this movement as a collective enterprise, it presents Le Maitre as the ideal sort of labor leader who can give it impetus and direction. Reinhard Sander notes that de Boissière draws on both Uriah Butler and Jim Barrette, a contemporary of Butler's and head of the Trinidad Negro Welfare Association, to formulate the character of Le Maitre. Sander argues that this imaginative fusion speaks to de Boissière's desire to not just document past occurrences of labor strife in a social realist manner, but to progressively envision a better world (131–32). In *Crown Jewel*, Le Maitre and Cassie—who is compared to Charlotte Corday in terms of her revolutionary zeal and willingness be carried outside of traditional prescribed female gender roles by her conviction (de Boissière 359)—are presented as ideal labor leaders possessed of prudent levels of reserve and deep tactical understandings of the complexities that define the struggle in which they are involved.⁷ They are counterposed to Boisson and Joe Elias, the former of whom uses his position as a labor leader to secure power and influence for himself and the latter of whom deep-seatedly would like to do so as well. On the other hand, while Le Maitre experiences “a beguiling and dangerous consciousness of his power” (300), he is driven by an overwhelming impulse to challenge the “bosses” and fight against “exploitation” that leads him to a devotional kind of self-abnegation even as it threatens to make him something inhuman (250). Unlike Butler, Le Maitre's charisma and drive do not lead to his downfall; rather, he is betrayed by a Judas-figure, Winchester, who is jealous of Le Maitre's influence and success. So rather than serve as a fictional proxy for Butler, Le Maitre is presented as the sort of leader who, unhampered by pettiness, could lead Trinidad's working class to political independence and a more equitable distribution of resources.

Beyond the questions often addressed by works of proletarian literature, *Crown Jewel* also places in evidence the popular festive or, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term, carnivalesque character of the 1937 Trinidad uprising. In the section of the novel modeled on the Butler-led 1935 hunger march, a spirit of intoxicated revelry and social hierarchy-subverting humor unites the marchers and impels them onwards (252–54). After the strike breaks out, the milling crowd of workers experiences

a heady sense of release that allows them to step outside of everyday social roles. It permits them, for instance, to pelt a white woman in the buttocks with a stone, thus abjuring their subordinate racial and class status by humbling the woman through aggressive contact that asserts the existence of her lower bodily stratum. The subversive revelry continues, threatening at times to overwhelm the strategic aims of the strike:

One young Negro, holding a broomstick in both hands over his head, began to shake and jump up in the Carnival style. Cassie wrenched it from his hands.

“What you think this is? Where you’ brains? Workers depending on us for bread and jobs and you tryin’ to mislead people? Get to hell out! This ain’t no merry makin’ business.”

“This ain’t carnival, this is war!” the Indian with the cutlass asserted threateningly. (340)

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White speak to the close social kinship between carnival and popular protest in *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*:

[T]o call it a ‘coincidence’ of social revolt and carnival is deeply misleading, . . . it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—and then only in certain areas—that one can reasonably talk of popular politics *dissociated* from the carnivalesque at all. . . . On the one hand carnival was a specific calendrical ritual. . . . On the other hand carnival also refers to a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourse which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts. (14–15)

Stallybrass and White note that one finds the survival of these popular festive practices particularly in “cultures which still have a strong repertoire of carnivalesque [in the “calendrical” sense] practices, such as Latin America, or [in] literatures produced in a colonial or neo-colonial context where the political difference between the dominant and subordinate culture is particularly charged” (11). Trinidad fits both of these descriptions, and it is thus as a Catholic country on the margins of empire that it preserved its carnivalesque practices and as a country with a wide gap in affluence and power between its bourgeoisie and subaltern

populations that it manifests the festive spirit of revolt observed by de Boissière. This is for both good and ill, as far as the aims of the strikers in *Crown Jewel* are concerned: it provides an impetus toward continued demonstration by dissolving the boundaries of subjectivity and allowing individuals to become part of a larger festive agglomeration, but it also risks leading strikers into the forms of non-productive violence that Stallybrass and White observe in their work, typified in *Crown Jewel* by the burning alive of the abusive policeman Corporal Duke.

First published in 1952 and subsequently revised for reissue in 1981, *Crown Jewel* envisions all of these aspects of the Butler Strike with the retrospective awareness of decades of social fallout from the unrest of the late 1930s. It concludes in a way that makes the ramifications of the strike especially portentous and provides a sense of the looming upheaval to be brought on by World War II and the American military occupation of the island (explored in de Boissière's follow-up novel, *Rum and Coca-Cola* (1956)), as well as the attainment of postcolonial independence that followed: "Neither of [the two old women whose conversation comprises an epilogue to the narrative] had any suspicion of the enormous events that were unfolding in Europe and would soon overturn and refashion the life to which they and all Trinidad had so long been accustomed" (361).

Retrospective Butler in Later Trinidadian Literature

Over thirty years after the first publication of *Crown Jewel*, with the Butler Strike half a century gone and potentially settling into the dustbin of history, Roach envisions it as one in a series of disappointments in the history of Trinidad's people. In "Hard Drought" (1989), he presents the Strike as both an instance of grand collectivization and a pipedream. Roach figures it as a moment of popular coming together—he uses the collective pronoun "we" throughout the first half of the poem—that radically shook a society in the waning phases of a quasi-feudal state of bondage and exploitation. He begins by observing "We marched in Butler's / barefoot made battalions / in a damned time / on the slave world's slipping edge" (74). In situating the efforts of Butler's barefoot (both ragtag and impoverished) followers at the cusp of the old era of

domination and servitude, Roach pegs the strike as a transitional event. However, Trinidad's people, the "we" of the poem, do not manage to achieve real agency through their collective action; instead they continue to be shunted and buffeted about by forces stronger than themselves. The poem repeatedly describes them as the object rather than the subject of movements: "they shot us down / and scattered us to the tradewinds. . . . the Middle passage flung us / on our knees" (74–75). Roach presents organized institutional violence as stronger than the common will of the people and able to disburse and atomize gathered masses. This sense of disempowerment is echoed in the allusion to the biblical Samson at the end of the first stanza: "[W]e shook the pillars of the place and wept" (74). The people of Trinidad are thus left with the power to grieve and perhaps, *a la* Samson, to destroy, but not the power to reform society along lines of their choosing.

Furthermore, the mass struggles commemorated by the poem brought about a return to desolation and bondage rather than the liberation and social improvement they sought to achieve. In the fourth stanza the poem's perspective shifts to the first person, and this speaker finds himself returned to "the ancestral void [of] / the Middle passage" (75). This is due to repressive forces arrayed against "Butler's barefoot made battalion" as well as the mediocrity and failings of the constituent members of the movement. In the fourth stanza the speaker pejoratively states, "We were a mob," one he figures as having fouled its own place of being, its efforts, with urine (75). The speaker proceeds to insist on the low character and self-sabotaging nature of this "mob," calling them jackals occupying the place of lions and suggesting that their "braying" caused their "barricades" to fall (75). The term barricade is significant both in the sense of a *bricolage* structure erected as a form of protection and as a revolutionary symbol redolent of the street-level character of past popular uprisings. In both senses, for Roach, the rioting workers of Trinidad faltered through their own essential mediocrity. They left themselves vulnerable and failed to live up to the precedent of over one hundred and fifty years of modern popular revolt.

While this marked a betrayal of Butler's efforts and vision, Roach proclaims, Butler himself was not equal to the task at hand. In other words,

the poem's treatment of Butler is more multivalent than Breiner suggests when he calls it "the tale of a hero ruined and bypassed by history" ("Ambivalent Aesthetic" 14). Roach numbers Butler as one of a series of failed and flawed "prophets" who promised millennial transformations to Trinidad and the wider Caribbean but left only a sense of abandonment, a condition of jaded exhaustion, and the bloody wreckage of idealistic striving. "Hard Drought" evokes Butler in terms of images of raggedness and decrepitude each time he is mentioned, using descriptions such as "barefoot" and images such as "tattered sheets." The poem reflects that neither he nor Williams was a Moses, a Toussaint l'Ouverture, or a Joshua; that is, a strong leader able to conduct a recently enslaved people to a better future (Roach 74). No revolutionary leader, Butler fleetingly inspired a quasi-religious sense of promise and gathering for collective action but ultimately lacked the character and ability to lead his people to the promised land. For Roach, Butler leaves a bittersweet legacy of awakening and galvanization which the collective "we" protagonist of the poem has failed to achieve in its essential mediocrity and baseness.

In the final two stanzas of the poem, the newly individuated first person speaker characterizes the strike and the larger Trinidadian past half century of failed social reform in terms of satiety and disgust. "[C]ount me among the numberless dead / this grisly century. / I've eaten so much history that I belch / boloms of years to come," he grumbles (75). He looks back on this series of disappointments in terms of feelings of post-drunken disorientation and scabrousness. The poem concludes with a vision of this history as a sort of bloody Stations of the Cross: preordained, inevitable, but futile:

We shall not build
a kingdom of this world that is not ours

Station by station throughout history
the ground is bloody; the hero's face
stamped on the woman's napkin masked in blood. (75)

The forces of time's passage and the reactionary resistance of the established social order crush the hero—Butler and his ilk—to the ground. The image of the hero's face is not, as in the biblical story of Veronica wiping Christ's face alluded to in the final stanza, a mark of divinity, but of human frailty and defeat. In this broken, exhausted final note, the poet finds no hope of a brighter future and sees in the condition of Trinidad's people a resounding kind of disenfranchisement and dispossession: "We shall not build / a kingdom of this world that is not ours," indeed.

In a more broadly sweeping manner, Naipaul also conceives of the events of 1937 in terms of a larger set of Trinidadian historical trajectories in his *A Way in the World* (1994). At the heart of the text, which mixes memoir, history, travelogue, and *roman à clef*, is an attempt to come to terms with individual and cultural memories of Trinidad, which for Naipaul involves feeling out the gaps or absences that develop in one's sense of place due to the wages of exilic displacement and confronting the inscrutable spaces between the content of the historical record and the actualities of the personal and familial past. The text's opening chapter frames it thematically in this regard, with the narrator reflecting on the disorienting sensations of returning to a native place after a considerable time away, unsure to what extent things have changed versus how much his memory has distorted his sense of place. The book ends with an image of the inevitable return of the exile—in this case, the narrator's former civil service colleague Blair—in death. In between these textual bookends, *A Way in the World* explores the complexities inherent in Trinidad's socio-historical makeup, particularly the driving spirit(s) that tend to determine historical outcomes yet so often go unrecorded.

Within this overarching conceptual framework, *A Way in the World* figures the Butler Strike as both a watershed moment and part of a larger pattern of cyclical regional historical repetition. In general, Naipaul tends to dismiss the strike as an event carried along by its own internal force rather than the agency of its constituent participants. It erupted, catalyzed to some extent by Butler, and then petered out: "And then, as happened in the slave days, passion died down, and people returned to

being themselves” (81). In Naipaul’s view, Trinidad possesses an enduring topography, climate, and ingrained patterns of behavior that make history—envisioned as a repetitious series of desperate, deluded strivings—repeat itself. In the opening of the “Passenger: A Figure from the Thirties” section of *A Way in the World*, Naipaul evokes these essential aspects of Trinidad’s spatial identity and notes the importance of adopting a perspective of partial remove in order to apprehend it. He, the narrator, standing on the easternmost point of the island with the benefit of endogenousness and historical consciousness, can see these aspects of place clearly, while Columbus, half a millennium prior and viewing the same point as an outsider floating in the Caribbean Sea, could not. With the passage of time, vantage points of historical insight open up, as they did when attitudes towards travel, leisure, and the military past began to change during the interwar years, which Naipaul credits with enabling the perspective of Calder-Marshall discussed below.

Wilson-Tagoe sums up Naipaul’s vision of Caribbean history—expressed in his *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969)—as one of dislocation and shipwreck, within which the individual tries to exert his or her will to bring about some desired change only to be thwarted by entropy and the larger network of forces governing the region’s destiny (Wilson-Tagoe 29). Thus major players’ roles in Naipaul’s narrative re-creation of the strike have a quixotic quality, one both idealistically committed and futile. Butler’s role in the text is equivocal in this manner. Foster Morris (the book’s fictionalized stand-in for Calder-Marshall) calls him “a crazy black preacher” (Naipaul 93). The narrator echoes this sentiment, albeit more cautiously, allowing for the possibility that Butler’s lunacy was an admixture of conviction and drive: “He was a preacher, and there was something in his passion or derangement that took the oilfield workers to a pitch of frenzy” (80). This imputation of a fanaticism that leads the strikers beyond what the text considers safe and acceptable is closely wedded to its critique of Trinidadian black nationalism. Naipaul’s representation of the Butler Strike is presaged by an account of the more recent occupation of the main government building and police headquarters in Port of Spain by a group of black Muslim converts that resulted in a frenzy of hostage-taking and slaughter. Naipaul presents

this as part of a cyclical pattern, described repeatedly in similar terms, almost like a refrain: Trinidad's blacks "find virtue in the original mood of rejection; and over the years they . . . have grafted on to that mood the passions of more extreme and more marginal and more publicized black causes from other places. So disaffection [grows], feeding on an idea of an impossible racial rightness" (38). For Naipaul, the end result is continually the same: an eruption of havoc followed by a rapid onset of inertia and return to the status quo. In his recounting of the occupation of the government building, Naipaul describes this denouement (note the similarity to the lines quoted above regarding the end of the Butler Strike): "And then, as so often happened during slave revolts in these islands, the rebels appeared not to know what to do: all energy and exaltation had been gathered up and consumed in the drama of the attack, the surprise, the drawing of the first blood, the humiliation of the people in authority" (41). In terms of the Butler Strike, Naipaul again uses the voice of Foster Morris to give the bluntest articulation of his basic position:

"They were a bunch of racial fanatics."

"Who?"

"Butler and a lot of the crowd around him." (92)

The essentialist racialist character of these generations of insurrectionists makes them suspect in the eyes of the text; their revolts overflow with tribalist sentiment and precious little guiding rationale and agenda. Furthermore, they are tinged with the "absurdity" that Naipaul imputes to Trinidad and its deep-seated, conflicted ambivalence:

It was the idea of the absurd, never far away, that preserved us. It was the other side of the anger and the passion that had made the crowd burn the black policeman Charlie King alive. . . . Charlie King wasn't hated in Trinidad . . . he was to become, in fact, in calypso and folk memory, a special sacrificial figure, as famous as Uriah Butler himself, and almost as honoured, and . . . the place on the road where he was burned was to be known as Charlie King Corner: a little joke about a sanctified place. (82)

This ambivalence, which *A Way in the World* terms “absurdity,” makes the goals of Trinidad’s successive black revolutionaries unattainable. In the face of the impossibility of thinking and acting grandiosely in Trinidad, Naipaul presents his own outlook, characterized by ironizing humor, as a saner, more logical alternative (113–14).

In coming to terms with the historical significance of the Butler Strike and the wider cultural valences of twentieth-century black nationalism, *A Way in the World* equally makes *roman à clef* use of the figure of James (in the fictional guise of Lebrun). The text refers to the Marxist/anti-colonialist/black nationalist James/Lebrun as an “impresario of revolution” rather than a true driving force; as a thinker who may have anticipated various liberationist movements across the developing world but by no means instigated them (108). As a spokesman for black power, Lebrun is credited with giving voice to racial complaints where silence has been conditioned by various forms of oppression (119). *A Way in the World* goes so far as to describe the encounter between Lebrun and his audience as “a kind of racial sacrament” (125). But in this work, as in novels such as *Guerillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), Naipaul figures the black nationalism he associates with Lebrun as destructive, exclusionary, and reactionary. It is inimical to the colonial subjects of East Indian derivation with whom Naipaul more closely empathizes—Trinidad’s Indian agricultural laboring class that occupies the margins of *A Way in the World* and the Indian merchant class of sub-Saharan Africa featured in *A Bend in the River*. Beyond this, Naipaul suggests that black nationalism was born of a real need to lash out at past and present oppression but is nonetheless unsustainable because its basic impulse is to return to an unobtainable and probably fictive pre-Lapsarian form of pure and authentic African being. “We all inhabit ‘constructs’ of the world,” Naipaul reflects. “Our grandparents had their own; we cannot absolutely enter into their constructs” (*A Way in the World* 159). Attempting to go “back to Africa,” physically or in spirit, is figured as an ill-fated “escape” effort brought on by the “twin natures” (what W.E.B. Du Bois calls double consciousness) of Africana peoples occasioned by their deep history of cultural contact with the Occident (Naipaul, *A Way in the World* 160). As such, Naipaul submits that though they may bring

upheaval and loss, black nationalist movements are destined to achieve little in the way of real social and political gains, and for this and other reasons Lebrun takes on a certain quixotic quality in *A Way in the World*.

Helen Hayward argues that both Lebrun and Foster Morris serve as means for Naipaul to dramatize his antipathy to “left wing assumptions” and his concomitant rejection of a number of potentially domineering guru figures along the path of his development as a writer and thinker (104–05). Foster Morris writes of Butler in laudatory terms. He “had seen in [Butler] a revolutionary, a figure like Gandhi, a man who had thought out his position, someone contributing to the general unraveling of the old order” (*A Way in the World* 83). Although Foster Morris otherwise resembles Calder-Marshall—in having written a book on Trinidad during the Radical Thirties and in his advice to an up-and-coming Naipaul—this point marks a spot of divergence between the two. As the preceding discussion of *Glory Dead* shows, Calder-Marshall’s attitude towards Butler was rather tepid. Nonetheless, Naipaul uses his fictional Calder-Marshall facsimile to voice his antipathy toward what he takes as the bad faith of British liberals: even though Foster Morris confesses to the text’s narrator that he found Butler and company to be a “bunch of racial fanatics,” he hypocritically praises them because they were pitted against the big capitalists of the island (Hayward 94).

At the end of “Passenger: A Figure from the Thirties,” however, Naipaul ultimately conceives of Calder-Marshall/Foster Morris in somewhat more generous terms, esteeming him literary-historically as a pivotal bridge between the exoticist travel writing of the colonial era and later travel authors of more postcolonial sensibilities. Earlier in the chapter he criticizes Calder-Marshall/Foster Morris for attributing an English “kind of social depth and solidity and rootedness” to the Trinidadians he wrote about (81). Naipaul argues that they lived in an existential state of contingency, uprootedness, and deprivation that makes the comic “absurdism” discussed above a much more suitable and honest representational approach. Nonetheless, Naipaul concludes that Calder-Marshall/Foster Morris’ interpretation of Trinidad and the Butler Strike was more incomplete than harmful and in conceiving of the historical actors it represented as agents with dignity, wholeness,

and their own demands and aspirations, his interpretation marked an important turning point on the road from a colonial to a postcolonial outlook in the literature of the developing world (105).

Genre and the Dialogic Uriah Butler

The preceding analyses suggest the considerable extent to which genre shapes the representational dynamics of a major historio-cultural event like the Butler Strike. A journalistic approach like that of Calder-Marshall or polemical one like that of James enables a considerable degree of contextualization of and direct commentary on the events in question but also situates the reader at a degree of remove from the “ground level” immediacy of the human passions that drive these events. Equally, these approaches present history from a singular ideological perspective as ultimately knowable and readily comprehensible, a set of occurrences that can be read and made to yield a number of lessons and conclusions in a fairly straightforward manner. De Boissière’s use of the heteroglossic⁸ genre of the novel, on the other hand, allows him to put in evidence the complex nexus of inter-group social tensions that comprised the social milieu that spawned the strike and was in turn radically transformed by it. Here the ultimate meaning and consequences of the uprising are less determinate and more ambiguous, even though the novel’s representational politics are distinctly pro-labor. Naipaul’s hybrid textual approach draws on the strengths of both the novelistic and the reportorial to a certain degree: though it fails to go as far in either conceptually processing the event with certainty as the former or evoking its multivalence as the latter, it manages to be simultaneously personal, meta-historical, and critically skeptical in its representation of the nature of the strike and its repercussions. Finally, Roach’s poetic evocation of Butler and the events that would come to carry his name allows for a more totalizing, generalizing subjective take on their legacy and import. It offers viscerally felt history and the intensely personal apprehension of the line of historio-cultural genealogy that emanated from the Butler Strike.

But beyond this, this body of texts demonstrates that there is no single 1937 labor strike or Uriah Butler passed down through generations. Rather, there are a range or field of mythic Butlers and Strikes consti-

tuted by discourse and variously manifested in the writings of the authors he captivated. A people needs heroes, or “forefathers” if you will, and this is particularly the case for a recently independent country engaging in the cultural work of consolidating a sense of national identity. Washington Irving did this for the young United States of America with his biographies of George Washington and Christopher Columbus; in a less boosterish spirit, James, Calder-Marshall, Roach, and Naipaul have done this for the people of Trinidad. Literature and history, while never entirely separate, draw particularly close in form and spirit in this endeavor, as our popular sense of the trajectories that gave shape to the present is codified, contested, and reformulated.

Notes

- 1 The Butler Riots are often referred to in academic discourse as the Labor Strike of 1937 so as to not place undue importance on Tubal Uriah Butler, one of the central figures of the Strike whose role as leader and organizer was far from uncomplicated, as the ensuing study will show.
- 2 The former of these is documented in Salkey’s novel *Riot* (1967), while the latter figures prominently in Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953).
- 3 There is some disagreement among historians regarding this death total. Neptune, for example, places it at fifteen (41).
- 4 In his introduction to *Butler Versus the King: Riots and Sedition in 1937* Davis situates the prosecution of Butler in terms of the broader “pattern of colonial and neo-colonial policy to utilize legislation for the purpose of suppressing nationalist movements and frustrating the political ambitions of the proletariat” (9).
- 5 A broader, much lengthier study of the literature of the Butler Strike might also consider such texts as Kissoon’s play *God and Uriah Butler* (1967), Collin’s poem “The Lesson” (1985), George’s *The Saga of Uriah Butler: A Three Act Play* (1981), and Kwabena’s poem “never forget” (2005).
- 6 Trinidad’s labor leaders of other derivations, namely the Corsican creole Arthur Andrew Cipriani and Indian-descended Adrian Rienzi, fare somewhat better in Calder-Marshall’s estimation.
- 7 *Crown Jewel* even manages to legitimize somewhat the killing of Charlie King (Corporal Duke in the novel) and absolve the strike leaders of wrongdoing. Duke is presented as sadistic and abusive—he beats a pregnant Cassie until she suffers a miscarriage. As the strike breaks out, Cassie moves to throw kerosene on him, only to be held back at the last minute by moral restraint. Nonetheless, another member of the crowd grabs the kerosene away from her, and Duke is immolated.

8 Heteroglossic, here, is meant in the sense proposed by Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*: that of a text consisting of a patchwork of voices representing the contesting ideological positions of the different groups that comprise a given society.

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