

Preface: A Postcolonial Avant-Garde?

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One of the interviews that I had imagined for my series with Caribbean writers and intellectuals but that did not take place was with Kamau Brathwaite. An enthusiast for the work of *Small Axe* (it was he, as I have said before, who coined the now ubiquitous moniker *sx*), Brathwaite nevertheless staunchly resisted being interviewed, at least by me. And, of course, his lamentable passing in February 2020 has now closed off forever any possibility of that conversation. Central among the topics I had intended to cover with Brathwaite, had I been able to conduct that interview, was the story of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM)—how to think about it as a postcolonial *intervention* into what he had later called the “social arts.” I had pursued other avenues to the story, but to no avail. I had once telephoned Andrew Salkey in Amherst, Massachusetts, to see if he would talk to me about CAM, but he said that there was really nothing left to say because Anne Walmsley’s important book, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972*, had said everything that was needed. Salkey was to die in April 1995 without my having met him.¹ I had had the good fortune to meet with the remarkable John La Rose at his home in Finsbury Park, London, not far from the legendary New Beacon Books, but he was already unwell and, alas, he would pass away in February 2006 before I could arrange a more prolonged discussion. And so I do not know the story of CAM in exactly the way I would like, that is, as a story linked to the literary-intellectual biographies of its founding figures.

In a short essay (a kind of announcement, really) published in 1968, Brathwaite reflected on the circumstances that motivated the founding of CAM. When he arrived in Britain in 1966, he said,

¹ Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon, 1992).

he found to his surprise virtually nothing of a sense of *presence* among West Indian literary and visual artists. Throughout the 1950s, these artists not only had produced a respectable body of work but also had attracted an impressive recognition. And yet here they were a decade later living and working in isolation—not only “exiled” from their respective Caribbean homelands but in isolation from each other and from the “cultural life” of British society.² This is a question—the relation between the artist and society—that preoccupied Brathwaite in the 1960s, and it is what motivated the founding of CAM. The “‘format’ of the Movement,” as Brathwaite put it, was animated by three imperatives: one, the creation of an “artists’ co-operative” to facilitate discussion and exchange among West Indian artists, in particular around the connection between their work and the Caribbean; two, the building of a dialogical relationship with readers, listeners, and viewers, a relationship with a relevant public; and finally, three, the stimulation of contact with writers and artists from outside the Caribbean.³ So one can discern in what Brathwaite was provisionally reaching after here an implicit theory of the literary and visual arts—an *aesthetic* theory—concerning the conditions not only for the flourishing of individual artists and their individual works of art but also, and more importantly, for the flourishing of critical contact both among artists (as an interpretive community) and between artists and the society in relation to which their work might be thought of as an intervention.

This is the origin story of CAM, or as close as we will have it. But what Brathwaite does not tell us is why Caribbean artists being brought together should understand themselves as a *movement*. Of course, memorably, in the United States, in the months following the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka had launched the Black Arts Movement with the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem. Perhaps this was one of the models, though Brathwaite does not mention it as an inspiration in his essay. What conception of intervention or activism or criticism around the literary and visual arts was implied in this idea of a movement? What existing structure of the arts constituted the status quo such that what was required in confronting it was not merely the subversions of individual artists and works of art but the collective, concerted effort of a movement? In truth, I do not know the answers to these questions. Clearly, CAM can be linked to a radical modernist sensibility. Certainly, most of its founding personalities belonged to that colonial generation born in the Caribbean 1920s and 1930s for whom the aesthetic imperatives of modernism seemed to offer an ambiguously compelling avenue of critique of the ideological and representational conventions of colonial race and class. But was there also something deeper and more profound than formal experiments with novelty, linguistic opacity, personal autonomy, and expressive radicalism at stake in CAM? Implied in the project of a movement, was there also a questioning of the larger assumptions of the *institution* of art embodied in the relation between the artist and postcolonial society, however inchoately, that CAM sought to engage? In these preliminary notes, the question I have is whether or to what extent CAM can be thought of in relation not only to the idea of a vernacular modernism but also to the idea of a postcolonial *avant-garde* movement.

² See Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, “The Caribbean Artists Movement,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 14, nos. 1–2 (March–June 1968): 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 58.

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In the much-debated *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger offers one critical account of the emergence of the historical avant-garde movements in 1920s and 1930s Europe (futurism, Dadaism, surrealism, and so on).⁴ Obviously, I can in no way, in the space to hand, do justice to the complex critical-historical argument at play in Bürger's book. I intend only to flag certain dimensions of the intervention he makes that seem to me suggestive for thinking about CAM's incipient aesthetic politics. Part of what is suggestive about Bürger's book is its critique of the widespread understanding of the avant-garde movements as encompassing those visual and literary artists in the early twentieth century who articulated skepticism, sometimes wholesale rejection, of the representational conventions of the high art of that period in the historical development of European capitalist society. In this conception, what defines the avant-garde, above all, is the deliberate, almost principled embrace of such mediating strategies as shock, hermeticism, negation, defamiliarization, and so on, strategies that imply an ideological critique of conformism and orthodoxy. In this sense, the avant-garde movements differentiated themselves from modernism in little more than emphasis.

Bürger disagrees with this argument and its implications. For him, what distinguishes these movements is less the style of their art than the *target* of their critique. What these movements aimed at, he argues, had little to do with the variety of schools of art that preceded them and more to do with the *institution* of art itself, that whole domain that circumscribes the established conditions of production and distribution of art as well as the ideological frameworks that shape the conception and reception of what can count as art. What the avant-garde movements turned their critical attention to, therefore, was the status of art as *such* in bourgeois society, and in particular how this status was defined by the whole problematic of *autonomy*. To be sure, Bürger's argument is based on a historical account of the development of modern art in the context of the transformations within European capitalist society. On this account, it was only when art *detached* itself from the practice of social life, as it had in high modernity, that the idea of the autonomy of art could emerge in accentuated form—autonomy as a distinctive and in fact privileged sphere of experience and resource. This was the period of the erosion of the social effect of art and the loss of the social function of the artist. As the “self-criticism” of bourgeois art, Bürger maintains, the avant-garde protest aimed precisely both to reveal this alienated state of affairs and to reintegrate art and the artist into the practices of social life.

Now, admittedly, what Bürger's book offers is, in all the tediously familiar ways, a relentlessly European American story. The debates it stages are enacted as though they take place within a private club of Critical Theory to which only the cognoscenti are permitted entry. Nowhere does Bürger even begin to recognize (much less integrate into the frame of his thinking) the fact that the story of the modern in which he is trafficking, and within it the story of the avant-garde movement, is partly and significantly a story about European empire. Think no further than the trajectory of André Breton. However, it is less the historical details than the *conceptual* intervention that should

4 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

claim our attention: the *re-description* of the oppositional idea of the avant-garde that allows us to appreciate the decisive contrast between a form of critique focused on competing styles or schools of works of art and a form of critique focused on the institution of art that is their common enabling condition.

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The point of these reflections, then, is not to mindlessly impose concepts such as modernism or avant-garde on the history of Caribbean literary or visual arts. There is a sense, of course, that for historical reasons—namely, the formation of the Caribbean as a modern colonial structure within a globalizing capitalism and our conscription consequently as subjects within a modern story—we cannot evade these concepts. That is our inescapable burden. Our challenge, rather, is to inquire, in a wholly provisional and exploratory way, whether or to what extent certain *revisionary* uses of these concepts (modernism, avant-garde) should *provoke* us to ask new questions about these histories—including new questions about CAM and its place in a critical postcolonial story of Caribbean arts practice. I would like to suggest that perhaps part of the intuition—the incipient critique—embodied in the activist and oppositional idea of a *movement* of Caribbean literary and visual artists promoted by CAM was a rejection of some dimensions at least of the privileged idea of autonomy (those that fetishized, for example, the artist as a sequestered sovereign genius) and with it the hegemonic assumptions of the institution of modern art in which art occupied a place apart from the social world and spoke in its own indecipherable language. I would like to imagine that the idea of a movement (even if not explicitly articulated in this way) is relevant insofar as what was at stake for CAM was less a matter of artistic style or the status of individual works of art than a whole foundational terrain of inherited ideas and values and structures of modern art that Caribbean artists were obliged to inhabit and internalize, and in relation to which they were obliged to create. Without of course giving up the demand for some notion of artistic independence (the artist as *nonaligned*, for example), what CAM aimed to encourage was a participatory community of dialogue and reciprocity that would activate a sense of the relevance of art and the artist to the social worlds of Caribbean life. I want to wonder whether there isn't an important sense in which this endeavor should count as precisely a kind of avant-garde intervention.

Alas, CAM never did move successfully to the Caribbean when Brathwaite and others returned in the late 1960s. In some sense CAM suffered the fate of other avant-garde movements, that is, their eclipse by forms of political radicalism—in the case of CAM, the political radicalisms that emerged in the Caribbean in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nevertheless, from within the context of the Small Axe Project, which has never aspired to be a movement, there is much to learn from the inspiring example of the Caribbean Artists Movement.

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