

The Black Power Movement in Trinidad and Tobago

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the impact of Black Power in Trinidad and Tobago during the 1960s and 1970s. Black Power appealed to a wide cross-section of the public, including academics, trade unionists, and the underprivileged. There is emphasis on the global and regional linkages, including the Sir George Williams Affair in Canada and the Black Power Movement in the United States. Furthermore, Black Power participants in Trinidad and Tobago maintained contacts with their counterparts in other Caribbean countries. The article also provides evidence that the Black Power Movement highlighted the economic problems, racism, and social crisis facing Trinidad and Tobago. This included removal of restrictions from certain jobs and reduction of the racial tension between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. Mention is made of individuals and groups who provided leadership, guidance, and ideological input within the movement.

Origins of Black Power

Black Power in Trinidad and Tobago, during the 1960s and 1970s, was strongly influenced by the ideology of Pan-Africanism, which emerged during the nineteenth century and continued into the early twentieth century when Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican based in the United

States, promoted race consciousness during the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Race consciousness, African identity, and pride were important components of Pan-Africanism and Garveyism, which comprised the foundation of Black Power. The emergence of Black Power during the 1960s signified a struggle to reclaim authority, power, identity, and respect. Black Power in the United States was a response to many years of racism faced by African Americans and that turbulent era was marked by discontent with the “establishment” and rejection of conventional politics.

Black Power in the Caribbean, however, was a response to racism but also to the negative socioeconomic effects of colonialism and imperialism (Riddell, 1972, pp. 7–9). Trinidad and Tobago had achieved independence in 1962, but its natural resources continued to be exploited by foreign oil and sugar companies, including Texaco, Tate and Lyle, British Petroleum, and Shell. This “independent” status represented the ending of political ties to European countries and meant that Trinidad and Tobago had the freedom to govern themselves. However, the economic and social freedom of West Indians had not yet been achieved. For instance, a 1970 survey of Tobago revealed that 75% of the best land was owned by either the local elite or foreigners. Some members of the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), a major Black Power group based in Port-of-Spain (in Trinidad), visited Tobago in March 1970 for one week and sought to enlighten the people. Tobagonians needed the land to plant food, but “some of it was left in bush and treated like a tourist resort” (Daaga, 1995, p.197). Thus, one of the demands of Black Power was the need for more locals owning land, local ownership of companies operating in the Caribbean, and the employment of more locals in these companies. The relatively high levels of poverty and unemployment in 1970 made Black Power more appealing to the masses in the Caribbean and Global South. In the Caribbean, during the late 1960s to

¹ John La Guerre (1995) believed, “The doctrines of Black Power were essentially an amalgam of Marxism and Garveyism” (p. 282).

1975, unemployment levels fluctuated from 12% to 30%, while the percentage of persons below the poverty line varied from 15% to 35%.² A variety of labels have been used to describe the events of the 1960s and 1970s in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world, such as “revolution,” “disturbances,” “uprising,” and “movement,” which possess different meanings for different people. The pride and consciousness of people of African descent were visible with such symbols as the dashiki, Afro-hairstyles, and the clenched fist of the Black Power Movement (Williams, p. 1112).

Who first used the term “Black Power?” In 1966, during the Civil Rights era in the U.S., Willie Ricks, an activist of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), used the slogan “black power for black people” in rallies and later shortened it to “black power” (Johnson, 1990, p. 83). On June 17, 1966, Stokely Carmichael, a member of SNCC, used the slogan “Black Power” at a rally in Mississippi. Carmichael was born in Trinidad in 1941 and migrated to the United States in 1952.³ In an address to a crowd of 500 Afro-West Indians and African Americans at the Brooklyn Community Centre, in 1970, Stokely Carmichael argued that Pan-Africanism was the ideal political philosophy for Blacks throughout the world in their imperialistic struggles (Black Power advocate hits Carib govts, 1970).

What is Black Power? The term is subject to differing interpretations. In 1970, Brinsley Samaroo, an Indo-Trinidadian and participant in Black Power, viewed it “... as part of a world-wide struggle for awareness among black people, seeks to revive our folklore which the British banned as primitive, our art and our customs brought by our forefathers.... It is seeking to make the black man aware of himself and of his capacities and thus enable him to take his future in his

² See United Nations Development Programme: Trinidad and Tobago for the unemployment percentages for Trinidad and Tobago.

³ C. L. R. James said that “Black Power” “is destined to become one of the great political slogans of our time” (as cited in Carmichael, 2003, p. 580).

own hands and not trust it to people who still doubt that any black man has talent” (African-Indian solidarity, 1970). Walter Rodney (1969) illustrated that achieving Black Power was not “racially intolerant” in multicultural and multiracial Caribbean societies (p. 29). The presence of East Indians in the Black Power Movement has generated considerable debate. Stokely Carmichael’s concept of Black Power in the Caribbean was limited to Blacks and excluded Indians and Chinese (Deport Stokely and avoid bloodbath, 1970).

Stirrings of the Sixties

As early as 1965 the fuse had been lit, which would eventually end with the explosion of the Black Power uprising of 1970 in Trinidad and Tobago. Trade unions were against the Industrial Stabilisation Act (ISA), which was passed in 1965 due to the high number of strikes. During the period of 1960 to 1964, there were 230 trade disputes in Trinidad and Tobago involving 74,574 workers with a loss of 803,899 work days (Williams, 1969, p. 311). This oppressive legislation removed the right to strike among unions. In 1967, the outspoken George Weekes, in his President General’s address to the Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU) in San Fernando in South Trinidad, signaled an early warning to the governing People’s National Movement (PNM), which was ignored. He compared the struggle in North America to the racism faced in Trinidad and Tobago, “The Afro-Americans in the U.S.A., are struggling to the death for bread and freedom, therefore it is necessary for us—the blacks in Trinidad and Tobago to understand that the liberation of oppressed peoples of the world depends on the liberation of black people in the U.S.A. I hope the delegates are as happy as I am in knowing that Trinidad and Tobago has contributed a noble and famous son to the liberation struggle of the Afro-

Americans in the person of Stokeley [sic] Carmichael. He has given to them the slogan that has electrified the world: ‘BLACK POWER’” (Success through unity, 1967).

The involvement of Caribbean-born Blacks in Black Power in North America and England increased the movement’s appeal among the working class in the West Indies. For instance, Harry Belafonte (whose mother was from Jamaica) was well-known for promoting Caribbean music in the U.S. and was also an activist in the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, Belafonte was a supporter and admirer of the Black Power Movement. On May 15, 1989, in an interview, Belafonte admitted that, “even if you achieve civil rights, one did not necessarily achieve power” and further revealed the role of Black Power and the Black Panthers during this turbulent era:

... there always had been a quest for power, the whole struggle in the Civil Rights Movement was, was a constant reflection, of, ah, a certain amount of powerlessness that, ah, was, that had permeated through Black life, Black culture, Black aspiration. Ah, so I think people were constantly in touch with the idea that we were in need of power. ... Ah, but, when it arrived and when it was used as effectively and as powerfully as Rap Brown used it or Stokely used it as all of the guys out of SNCC and women out of SNCC applied it, it touched something that was irreversible. Ah, the Black Panthers did in fact, ah—cause quite a tremor in the movement. Ah, it wasn't even so much that it was a group called the Black Panthers and they appeared to be, quote, unquote, very militant and were going to go to, were prepared to bear arms, prepared to go down. That wasn't the problem. The problem really was that there was such an inordinate level of intelligence that made up all those young men and women who came together.... (Eyes on the prize II interviews, 1989)

Belafonte’s verbal and financial support for certain aspects of Black Power groups and individuals was not a surprise because he was a friend of people like Carmichael while a member of the SNCC during the 1960s.

The Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the U.S. and decolonization movements in the British empire were actually parts of the same transnational processes. In England, Trinidadians were also intensely involved in Black Power. In 1967, Tony Martin, president of

the West Indian Society at Hull University, heard C. L. R. James, a Trinidadian, delivering a fiery address at Black Power meetings at Conway Hall and Speakers' Corner. Martin was impressed by this fellow Trinidadian's oratorical skills and knowledge and arranged for James to speak at his university on the topic of "Black Power and the Third World" (James, 1967; Martin, 1967a, 1967b). Michael de Freitas, a controversial Trinidadian involved in the Black Power Movement in England was (also known as Abdul Malik and Michael X) damaged the image of Black Power through his notorious actions. Malik's return to Trinidad and his involvement in criminal activity resulted in him being jailed and executed in 1975.

Events across the Caribbean indicated that Black Power would not be restricted to any country or group. In June 1968, Rosie Douglas, chairman of the Congress of Black Writers at Montreal, invited C. L. R. James to be a guest speaker at their gathering. Walter Rodney, a lecturer in the Department of History at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, also attended this historic event, which was held in October 1968. Rodney was a supporter of Black Power and had been genuinely concerned about the poor in society.⁴ Prime Minister Hugh Shearer of Jamaica used this opportunity to ban Rodney from returning to UWI. Many in the government and elites viewed Rodney as a threat to the status quo in Jamaica because he argued that Caribbean poverty was a direct result of continued White control of banking, industry, commerce, and transportation and that without Black ownership, imperialism would persist even after independence. This ban by the Jamaican government caused the Guild of Undergraduates at UWI to close the campus, after which the students marched to the prime minister's residence and parliament. The clash with police resulted in some demonstrators being killed and a considerable

⁴ Rodney was a graduate of the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, and, in 1966, earned his PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He taught at University College, Tanzania, and also UWI in Jamaica. See Rodney, 1969.

loss of property in Kingston. At the St. Augustine campus, the students also staged a protest to condemn Rodney's banishment from the Mona campus.⁵

Discontent with the status quo continued in Canada and, in spring 1968, there were complaints were filed against a racist professor who failed Black students in his courses at the Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. On January 29, 1969, the complainants and approximately 200 other students protested by occupying the computer lab at the university. This sit-in continued until February 10 and negotiations were initiated, which failed and, on February 11, 1969, students rebelled (*Sir George Williams Riot*). The lab was set ablaze when students were attacked by the police. Rev. Harold Sitahal, an ordained Presbyterian minister from Trinidad and Tobago, was a postgraduate student at McGill University when the eruption occurred and his sister-in-law, Joy Sitahal, provided food to the protestors at the computer lab and he attended lectures by Black Power activists, from United States, who visited Montreal (Personal interview, 2010, February 6). This 1969 uprising was the beginning of the Black Power movement in Canada and influenced the movement in Trinidad and Tobago. It was obvious that Black Power activists shared tactics and thought in global terms, even though their end goals were local or national.

The reverberations in Canada contributed to the growing Black consciousness in Trinidad and Tobago. Almost two weeks later, on February 26, 1969, students of the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Trinidad and Tobago prevented the Governor-General of Canada, Roland Michener, from entering campus. There were debates as to whether the action was appropriate and the embarrassed UWI administration considered expelling Geddes Granger (Makandal Daaga), Dave Darbeau (Khafra Kambon), and Augustus Ramrekersingh. However, they soon abandoned the idea, probably fearing more protests. On April 21, 1969, a bus strike involving the

⁵ See Teelucksingh, 2012.

progressive Transport and Industrial Workers' Union (TIWU) headed by Joe Young and Clive Nunez and the radical Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) occurred, with more than 650 workers taking action against the Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC). The attempt to block the buses was met with stiff resistance from the police and several leaders, including Clive Nunez, were beaten. Many union members were fined \$10 or sentenced to 14 days imprisonment, such as Joe Young (President of TIWU); Carlton Rosemin and Sylvester Mondesir (TIWU); Stephen Maharaj, who was leader of the Workers and Farmers Party (WFP); Krishna Gowandan (TIWU); and George Weekes (OWTU).⁶ This treatment of trade unionists further antagonized their relationship with the government. Similar rumblings within Trinidad and Tobago were also unfolding across the Caribbean.

There were enthusiastic responses to the first Black Power Conference in July 1969 in Bermuda. One thousand Bermudians and 200 delegates from the United States attended, including Rosie Douglas, a Black Power advocate who engaged in discussions with members from the St. Kitts Black Power group (Black Power advocate hits Carib govts, 1970). Intellectual groups were also part of these stirrings in the 1960s, such as the New World Group, founded during the 1960s at university campuses in the Caribbean and whose membership included Norman Girvan, Lloyd Best, James Millette, and Walter Rodney. The group's publication, *New World Quarterly*, sought to educate the Caribbean citizenry on socioeconomic and political issues and was also a forum for literary talent, including poets. The members of the group emphasized community outreach activities and teaching of alternative development models.

There were disagreements between Millette and Best as to who should lead the Trinidad branch, and was no consensus regarding the group's direction and future direction. Deryck Brown (1995), a former research fellow at UWI, contends that the New World Group eventually

⁶ See Brown, 1995; Nunez, 1995; Shah, 2000.

split into three factions: the Tapia House Movement, which published a newspaper, entitled, *Tapia* and was led by Best; a second splinter group that was under the direction of Millette and published the newspaper *Moko*; and David Murray and Dave D'Abreau, who joined NJAC (p. 548). All three groups contributed to the radical fervor of the 1960s and 1970s. This was evidence that academics and intellectuals were being affected by Black Power, but they were not able to predict the outbreak of protests in 1970 that would engulf Trinidad and Tobago.

Eruption of 1970

On January 10, 1970, ten Trinidadian students involved in the protest at Sir George Williams University (one had returned to Trinidad) were placed on trial and faced life imprisonment. Fortunately they were eventually freed and the Trinidadian government paid their fines and lawyer's fees. Valerie Belgrave, one of the protesters that was arrested, recalled that one result of this incident was that unity was generated between Canadian and West Indian Blacks in Montreal. They organized lectures and study sessions and began publishing a newspaper, *Uhuru*, which was edited by Bukka Rennie, an Afro-Trinidadian (Belgrave, 1995, p. 131).

On the first anniversary of the Sir George Williams Computer Revolt, on February 26, 1970, NJAC and other discontented groups staged a massive demonstration in the city of Port-of-Spain as a sign of solidarity with the protesting students in Canada and approximately 200 protestors entered the Roman Catholic Church and staged a sit-in. They chanted "Power, Power" for an hour and later entered the cathedral on Independence Square. There was a minor confrontation when marchers and police encountered each other at the Canadian High Commission on South Quay and was also a police presence at the Royal Bank of Canada on

Independence Square, who refused entry to the protestors. In addition, the bank's branch at Park Street was also visited and, along Frederick Street, protestors with loudspeakers condemned businesses as "exploiters." The demonstrators made their presence felt in front the Furness Building and the Trinidad Chamber of Commerce as well. Some businesses were afraid of the marchers and decided to close their doors. The historic march would end with a meeting in the evening at Woodford Square (dubbed the "People's Parliament" by activists in 1970). Nine of the leaders of this historic march were later arrested and faced charges, including a breach of peace and disturbing a place of worship. The Black studies group at McGill University sent a cable to Trinidad, condemning the police and supporting the demonstrators, who were protesting against "Canadian racist imperialism" (Cable: Let our brothers go, 1970).

The 9 leaders of NJAC, who were arrested in February, were released on March 4, 1970. On that day began the first of several massive demonstrations. Thousands of supporters, including Black Power groups from rural and urban areas in Trinidad and Tobago, converged outside parliament. They gave the traditional Black Power salute and shouted, "power." The demonstration then moved in a disciplined and silent manner to Woodford Square where speeches were made by several leaders, preceded along some of the main streets in Port-of-Spain, and then headed for "Shanty Town," one of the most notorious slums in Trinidad and Tobago. Groups involved in the demonstration included the Afro Turf Limers (San Juan), African Unity Brothers (St. Ann's), Southern Liberation Movement (San Fernando), and the African Cultural Association (St. James) (Meeks, 1995, p. 148). The next day would be more intense. Hundreds of supporters peacefully assembled to show solidarity at the trial of their leaders and were dispersed by the police. The angry supporters fled to downtown Port-of-Spain and smashed shop windows and, later that night, a Molotov cocktail was thrown into the home of

the Minister of Education and Culture. Fortunately, the minister was not injured, but this reinforced the views of a few members of the public that Black Power was violent and would disrupt their comfortable existence.

The fear and concern of the government, as a result of the violent attacks, was evident on March 11, when Karl Hudson Phillips, the attorney general, threatened to suppress the movement. Finally, on March 23, Prime Minister Eric Williams spoke to the public. Williams dealt with foreign control of the economy and promised to appoint a commission to investigate accusations of racial discrimination in the business sector. He also decided to reduce unemployment with money generated from a tax to be imposed on pioneer companies. The promises and assurances by the PNM did not appease the masses, who wanted immediate improvements in their lives. The Black Power marches and protests continued throughout Trinidad and Tobago, from which there were minor skirmishes with the police, but this soon changed when a protestor died. The killing of Basil Davis, a member of NJAC, by a policeman on April 6, 1970, mobilized persons from all walks of life. Indeed, his death meant that a martyr of the revolution emerged from the masses and encouraged thousands to attend Davis's funeral on April 9 and to join the movement. This incident contributed to the resignation of A. N. R. Robinson, a member of Parliament for Tobago East, on April 13, 1970, from the PNM government.

Almost a week later, on April 21, 1970, some rebel soldiers staged a mutiny. However, this act of treason was not linked to the Black Power revolution. Lieutenant Raffique Shah, one of the officers in the mutiny, claimed that there were no plans for the soldiers to join with NJAC or the protestors and that the rebels acted in response to corruption and inefficiency in the army.⁷ John Riddell (1972b), editor of *Labor Challenge*, believed the “relative inaction of the rebel

⁷ See Shah, 1995.

soldiers” contributed to Eric Williams obtaining military backing from the United States (p. 12). From April to May 1970, Prime Minister Eric Williams, who was also the Minister of National Security, seized the union’s books and its officers were victimized under the Emergency Powers Act of 1970.

On April 21, 1970, among the union members arrested and retained were George Weekes, Carl Douglas (assistant secretary, Palo Seco Branch) and Winston Lennard (education officer). On April 22, petrol bombs were thrown at *The Vanguard*’s print shop and an attempt was made to destroy the Paramount Building, headquarters of the OWTU. A day later, two other OWTU members—Nuevo Diaz (labor relations officer) and Chan Maharaj (member of the Port-of-Spain branch)—were arrested. On May 14 and 15, the OWTU’s books and records were seized and the union’s headquarters and print shop were invaded by the police. On May 29, the executive of the OWTU issued a statement denying rumors they were financing subversive organizations. Verne Edwards, vice-president of the OWTU, said that since the seizure of the records, the police had been “terrorising many of the Union members under the pretext that they were looking for missing documents.” The delay in reacting to events could have been a cause for the government to remain in power. C. L. R. James, speaking in Toronto in June 1970, claimed, “If only the OWTU Executive had launched a general strike to defend their arrested leaders, the government would have fallen” (as cited in Mohammed, 1995, p. 335).

In September 1970, Eric Williams sought to justify the imposition of the National Security Act. Williams contended, “Did not speakers on NJAC marchers encourage marchers to loot stores on Frederick, Henry, and Charlotte Streets with the words ‘Take Now, Pay Later?’ Who proclaimed ‘National Rape and Arson’ week?” He also reminded the public that George Weekes had called for the destruction of Frederick Street and OWTU’s Clive Phill wanted to

overthrow the democratically elected government of Trinidad and Tobago (Something old, 1970). Critics of the Security Act said that Williams sought to create a police state and a permanent state of emergency. On July 13, 1971, the fraud squad spent 4 hours searching the OWTU's headquarters in San Fernando. Among the items seized were bank statements, checks, receipts, and vouchers. Weekes told a police officer, "This is real fascism.... This is nothing but total aggression against the OWTU." A few months later, in August 1971, at the general council meeting of the OWTU, Weekes and two other members were arrested on fraud charges. At the court hearing on September 27, in a dramatic turn of events, Weekes cut his clenched fist and chest with a razor and shouted, "In the name of the Black Indian and African masses and in protest against the corrupt Williams' regime I shed my blood" (Weekes sheds blood, 1980). The growing disenchantment prompted the government to draft the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) in 1971. However, this failed miserably to reduce the antagonism of labor. Eventually the Industrial Relations Act of 1972 (Act No. 23) was passed and replaced the Industrial Stabilisation Act of 1965, which made cosmetic changes to the ISA, as it gave unions a limited right to strike.

More Power: Tobago, Students, and Women

Massive demonstrations were organized to reclaim Buccoo Reef and beaches at Pigeon Point and Bacolet for Tobagonians. In Bacolet, an estimated 5,000 demonstrators stopped at a popular nightclub and Daaga told the crowd that the owner had 13- and 14-year-old girls performing striptease acts for tourists. The owner was forced to apologize and stopped all striptease events. At Pigeon Point, demonstrators removed a steel gate that prevented free access to the beach and a crowd of 6,000 demonstrators ignored armed police as they sought to reclaim transport trade to Buccoo Reef. The largest of the Black Power demonstrations was the march to

Charlotteville on April 18, 1970, which was estimated at 12,000–15,000 Tobagonians, all of which were attempts to empower the people (The 1970 revolution-Tobago revisited, 2004). Some of the Tobagonian activists were thrown in cells in Tobago, whilst others were brought to Trinidad. Those Tobagonians who were sent to Trinidad remained in isolation and were not allowed to mix with Trinidadians. Aiyegoro Ome, one of the 1970 activists, recalled that some of these Tobagonians in Trinidad were illiterate and NJAC organized literacy classes for them (as cited in Ome, 1995, p. 368). There were Tobagonians who played noteworthy roles in these Black Power protests and marches, such as Ethelbert Wilson, Duport Ewing, Winston Dillon, Opuku Ware, Llenga Llenga, Embau Moheni, Kameel Akeel and Allan Richards. Most were employed and realized the risk of being involved in this radical movement and were from both rural and urban areas in Tobago. Some, such as Embau Moheni, would continue to be involved in NJAC after the post-1970 era and ensured that Tobago was not left behind in this global revolution.

Secondary school students were also involved in the Black Power protests in Tobago, as they began to debate and discuss issues affecting them and their society. Furthermore, these impressionable youths recognized the need to create a fair and just society. The students were against the imprisonment of soldiers who had been sympathetic to the protesting Blacks. For example, "... the students of Roxborough Composite School organised an 18-mile demonstration from Roxborough to Scarborough demanding that their soldiers be freed. This demonstration was joined by students from Schools in Scarborough, as well as parents on the way" (The 1970 Revolution—Tobago revisited, 2004). Two female secondary school students in Trinidad, Josanne Leonard (of Naparima Girls' High School in South Trinidad) and Ayesha Mutope Johnson (of Bishop's Anstey High School in North Trinidad) were dynamic leaders of the

National Organization of Revolutionary Students (NORS) during the 1970s. Josanne's father, Winston Leonard, was also prominent in the Black Power Movement in San Fernando. Some of the young women from NORS later joined NJAC. During the "March to Caroni," one participant recalled, "School-children lined the route, shouting 'power to the people!'" (It was a sick farce, 1995).

Groups, such as NORS and NUS (National Union of Students), were described by Bukka Rennie, a Black Power activist, as "self-organisations," which "perpetuated themselves through their own activities" (as cited in Rennie, p. 40). Shiva Naipaul, an Indo-Trinidadian novelist, was not impressed with the radical student activity, noting, "Student protest is gaining momentum because matters have reached a point where anything that is considered avant-garde is respectable. This sort of extremism is dangerous" (Meet Shiva Naipaul, aspiring young novelist, 1970).

In the West Indies, the events in 1970 impacted the women's movement as well. Some believe that "... the rise of feminism, which was a direct challenge to male authority, grew out of the Black struggle" (Leslie, 2005). Black women questioned their status in terms of gender and race/ethnicity as some of the pamphlets circulated by Black Power groups appealed to Indian and African women in Trinidad and Tobago to join their struggle (Pasley, 2001). Two examples of brave women who participated during 1970 were Barbara Grey-Burke (of the Spiritual Shouter Baptists) and Lieseli Daaga (Grey-Burke recounts: Women power in 1970, 2004).

The Presence of Indo-Trinidadians (East Indians)

On March 4, 1970, a demonstration in Port-of-Spain turned ugly when police attacks occurred, which resulted in the smashing of store windows and bombings. Conservative persons

felt the Black Power Movement was anti-East Indian after reports that a Kirpalani's was burnt during this march in the city. However the store and other Indian firms were untouched in March and April (Kambon, 1995b, p. 377). The leadership of NJAC did some damage control when they mobilized more than 20,000 persons in a march to San Juan, where a Kirpalani's was located, and appealed for solidarity with the East Indians. There were Indians in the Black Power Movement, such as Chan Maharaj, an Indo-Trinidadian who headed the National Freedom Organization based in Arouca. Maharaj spoke to the crowd at San Juan in March 1970, saying, "Black Power has not turned against the Indian community. If you are not white you are black. Black Power is not confined to those of the African race. The Indian is the brother of the Negro.... Go the canefields and evidence of slavery will be seen..." (40 years later, 1970).

In 1970, Brinsley Samaroo noted that the majority of Indo-Trinidadians did not want to be identified as "Black" and that they did not feel welcome in the Black Power movement because wearing dashikis was associated with Africa and the symbol of the clenched fist was taken from the Black Panthers, an Afro-American group, in the United States (Afro-Indian solidarity: Two views, 1970). Shiva Naipaul, in March 1970, contended that the role of the Indian within the Black Power Movement was "vaguely defined" (Meet Shiva Naipaul, 1970). There were myths in 1970 and after that contributed to the fears among both major races. Two of the myths are that the Indo-Caribbean is financially better off than the Afro-Caribbean and that the Indo-Caribbean needed to abandon their culture and heritage if there was any possibility of racial unity and solidarity (Look Lai, 1974, p. 36). A letter to the editor of the *Express* by Krishna Ramoutar of Sangre Grande said that Indo-Trinidadians do not consider themselves to be Black and that "... a movement cannot go on labelling other people as black whom they want to use for their own ends." Ramoutar also claimed that Indians were on the "ascending scale of

money power” and that the Afro-Caribbeans want “to drag the Indians with them” (Black Power Movement not for Indians, 1975). A letter to the editor of *The Vanguard* in 1970 by Denny Moore of Trinmar appeared misguided in his reason for Indians supporting Black Power:

What in my opinion is left for the East Indian group to do is to jump body and soul into the Black Power struggle to lift the Blacks out of the sinking quagmire into which they were put since the slave trade. Let them emphatically decide that their East Indian culture in its present form is unacceptable to them, and so begin an active search for roles they could play in changing the entire society. (African-Indian solidarity: Two views, 1970)

Prior to each Black Power march, huge banners were paraded with the words, INDIANS AND AFRICANS UNITE NOW. On March 12, 1970, the much anticipated “Caroni March” materialized, which covered 33 miles from Port-of-Spain in North Trinidad to Couva in central Trinidad. These were token signs of unity, which is obvious, as fewer than 100 East Indians were present in an estimated crowd of 5,000–10,000 (Meditz & Hanratty, 1987). The first leg of the route was from Port-of-Spain to the Eastern Main Road and one of the youthful marchers was Keith Shepherd, an Afro-Trinidadian who was a journalist for the *Trinidad Guardian* (The failure of 1970, 1995). They passed in front of the home of Bhadase Sagan Maharaj, an Indo-Trinidadian in Champs Fleurs in North Trinidad, where he was seated in his garden with a rifle surrounded by security guards. Bhadase was the president general of the All Trinidad Sugar and General Workers Union and this march threatened his political and ethnic bases. Maharaj was also prominent in the Hindu community.

At the Curepe Junction in North Trinidad, some university students joined the marchers. The final phase occurred along the Southern Main Road toward Caroni. A pledge was taken by the marchers “not to harm our Indian brothers but to take positive action against all who we deem responsible.” Ken Parmasad, an Indo-Trinidadian, was one of young members of the Society for the Propagation of Indian Culture (SPIC) who supported Black Power and also

identified the pivotal role of SPIC in ensuring the Caroni March was successful (Parmasad, 1995, p. 314). During the March to Caroni, people on microphones reminded the marchers not to enter any person's property, which showed proper leadership and the fact that there were no negative incidents demonstrates the genuineness of the marchers. Khafra Kambon, then a member of NJAC and a marcher, recalled the "warmth," "welcome," and "trust" displayed by Indians in Caroni (Kambon, 1995a, p. 236). However, there was an element of uncertainty and fear. Armed police and army officers along with Coast Guard airplanes reflected the concern among certain sections of the public. This did not intimidate the marchers, who continued in a disciplined and orderly manner. Rumors were being spread that the marchers were coming to take the jobs of the Indians and that African men would rape Indian women. To make matters worse, on the morning of March 12, the police warned shop owners to close their businesses, likely anticipating a repeat of the reaction in Port-of-Spain. Despite the negative publicity, villagers provided water and food to the marchers and all shops remained open and school children were in the streets. Furthermore, there were signs in villages that said, WELCOME, which indicated that the citizens wanted racial unity.

There was a satisfactory response from the Indian community when public meetings were held in Couva and Chaguanas in 1970. Three of the speakers in Couva were Basdeo Panday, Chan Maharaj, and Winston Leonard. The real test of race relations emerged after the meeting at the Couva market. In an unprecedented move, the marchers were welcomed to sleep in the homes of Indo-Trinidadians and shared their meals. This simple offer erased many years of mistrust and hate between the country's two major races. However, many realized that having these two groups unite in a march or demonstration was not the magic formula to end racism or

create equality. There continued to be polarization and this was reflected in the composition of the two major political parties.

The impact of the Caroni March was evident over the next few weeks. On April 19, some sugar workers approached NJAC seeking assistance. Bhadase Maraj had kicked a worker and the workers wanted NJAC to provide leadership as they struggled against the sugar union and company. The next day saw strikes within the sugar industry and there were plans for a march to Port-of-Spain on 21 April. However, this was not realized, as the prime minister declared a state of emergency. Emphasis, by writers, on the exploitation of the Indo-Trinidadian working class also sought to bridge the racial barrier. For instance, Darcus Owusu, in “The Long March to Caroni” in *The Vanguard*, argued “The Indians continue to be slaves to the Sugar Barons the division of the races remain a threat to any serious attempt to construct a nation and the hope of meaningful unity is lost amidst the guile and deceit of politicians” (African-Indian solidarity: Two views, 1970). A similar view was expressed by Look Lai (1974), arguing that the Indian-African conflict in the Caribbean “is a futile and wasteful struggle between two dispossessed groups unable to identify the real enemy: the Western imperialist (p. 30). Brinsley Samaroo, writing in 1970 in *The Vanguard*, expressed a similar view, “... whilst the Trinidad Indian and the Negro were quarrelling about the scraps of the economy, the white community and their black hangers-on were enriching themselves on the profits therefrom” (African-Indian solidarity: Two views, 1970).

In 1972, Samaroo presented a paper, entitled, “The East Indian response to constitutional changes in Trinidad and Tobago,” in a seminar held at UWI, St. Augustine. He identified the Black Power Movement affecting some in the Indo-Trinidadian community as they changed their names, revived rituals, and returned to Indian forms of dress. According to Samaroo, “The

impact has been significant because it posed squarely to the East Indian the problem of identity and the racial factor in Trinidad politics. And this is an additional reason why the East Indian community is going through its own ‘Black Power’ phase” (Black Power, Indiana, and politics, 1972). Indeed, genuine efforts have been made by individuals and groups to calm the troubled racial/ethnic waters. However, it can be argued that the racial unity of 1970 was transient and temporary. It is obvious that the limited racial unity in the marches did not materialize in all levels of society.

Long-Term and Short-Term Successes and Shortcomings

The success or shortcomings of the late 1960s and 1970 depend on the criteria used to judge the events in Trinidad and Tobago. The size of the marches and demonstrations did not translate into permanent gains for Blacks. The roar of the Black Power revolution seemed to have fizzled out after a few months. Syl Lowhar (1995b) contended, “Most of the successes have been reversed because there was no real revolution in a serious way” (p. 364) Another argument was that there was “a general lack of support” for Black Power in Trinidad, as the Black middle class and most of the Black lower class remained loyal to the PNM (Taylor, 2002, p. 112).

Why did a movement that generated thousands of demonstrators gradually implode? Was there a lack of proper organization and leadership in 1970? Wally Look Lai (1974) contended that a defect of the 1970 movement was that it was “a spontaneous and unorganised movement.” He further argued that the entire population of Trinidad and Tobago was not involved in 1970, but the unemployed bore the “brunt of the entire mass movement” (pp. 10–11). Winston Suite (1995), also a former academic of UWI, St. Augustine (and one of the Black Power students of 1970), was critical of the “arrogance” of NJAC and their “disregard for others” and that they

acted “as though the movement was its own” (pp. 356–357). Furthermore, there was an apparent lack of coordination and unity among the Caribbean countries. Walter Rodney, speaking on April 21, 1972, at the Caribbean Unity Conference at Howard University, seemed disappointed over the sequence of Black Power protests in the region, saying, “... I kept saying to myself- Jamaica first, the forces are ready.... Trinidad and Guyana, we have to wait. But the people of Trinidad did not wait. They moved (as cited in Lewis, 1998, p. 249). Better planning might have resulted in a greater impact. As the evidence shows, there was a lack of leadership, vision, and solid support in 1970.

The belief by some that NJAC’s failure to assess the shortcomings of 1970 and “move organizationally” to solve these problems resulted in the formation of the New Beginning Movement (NBM) (Lai, 1974, p. 13). The first public statement by the NBM, entitled, “Policy Proposals for Liberation,” was issued in December 1970. This revolutionary socialist group was formally launched in March 1971 and included its own newspaper, *New Beginning*. The group had branches in Canada, United States and Britain.

There were some short-term successes, such as the greater appreciation of local culture. Carnival became a “vehicle of protest” in 1970 and there were calypsos focusing on Black Power and social problems, such as “Time” by Black Stalin, “Answer to Black Power” by Chalkdust, and “No Freedom” by Kitchener. During Carnival, one costume depicted a White devil with blood on its teeth, other portrayals included images of Africa and mocked the country’s leaders.⁸ Another short-term success was that Caribbean governments were forced to deal with unemployment and foreign ownership. There was increased solidarity among the working class and trade unions as the government was seen as dictatorial. Furthermore, there was increased ethnic consciousness and the awareness of the ability of the masses to effect change.

⁸ See Lowhar, 1995, pp. 207, 220–221.

The spread of Black Power in the English-speaking Caribbean also contributed to the strengthening of ties among countries and solidarity among the Blacks and the West Indian diaspora in Canada, United States, and Britain. There was an intellectual revolution that occurred simultaneously and many young people became interested in issues such as democracy, party politics, and reading books by radicals and intellectuals. Local publications further encouraged this discourse. For instance, from January to June 1970, *The Vanguard*, the newspaper of the OWTU, sought to educate its members with excerpts from some of the major radical Black personalities. For instance, there were excerpts from Walter Rodney's *Groundings with My Brothers* and C. L. R. James's *Party Politics in the West Indies*, quotations from Che Guevara, and an article on Frantz Fanon.

The long-term impact of the Black Power Movement can be seen in the nationalisation of companies in Trinidad and Tobago. Before 1970, there were only 7 national companies in Trinidad and Tobago—Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, Tesoro, Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA), Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC), Trinidad and Tobago Telephone Company Limited (TELCO), British West Indian Airways (BWIA), and Trinidad & Tobago Electricity Commission (T&TEC). By 1990 there were 67. Before 1970, banking and insurance sectors were owned by foreign firms (Daaga, 1995, pp. 186–187) and banks tended to employ only light-skinned persons. A 1970 survey estimated that 86% of business leaders were White, but in 2013, an estimated 94% of persons employed in banks and public companies are Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians, mixed descent, and other ethnic minorities. Additionally, in 2013, 65% of participants in the business sector are Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians. These percentages reflect the tangible achievements of the Black Power Movement. In 2008, Tony Fraser, a newspaper columnist for the *Trinidad Guardian*, reflected on Black Power and believed it

contributed to the government promoting a “people’s sector” and establishing the National Commercial Bank and the Industrial Development Corporation. He also noted that 1970 encouraged young urban Blacks to become involved as small-scale traders and for others to become involved in restaurants, construction, and retailing (Indo, Afro-Trinis go after “whole loaf,” 2008).

The achievements of Black Power had certain limitations and shortcomings. Evidence of this is seen in the views of two newspaper columnists in Trinidad. In March 2009, Dennis Pantin, in the *Sunday Guardian*, felt that the Black Power Revolution of 1970 was an “unfinished” revolution because it had “no impact on the structures of decision-making.” Criticisms against the Roman Catholic Church in Trinidad and Tobago contributed to Christianity being examined for its benefits and relevance to the masses and in 2010, Lennox Grant, a newspaper columnist, wrote, “If the 1970 February revolution was relatively godless, our present state is overwhelmingly godful.” Grant claimed that, in 2010, “almost nobody dares talk to the churches, or about religion” and noted the use of religion by the country’s prime minister (40 years later, a counter-revolutionary plot).

In the first decade of the 21st century, there are still high levels of serious crimes (homicide, assault, and rape) in the small republic of Trinidad and Tobago (Baldeosingh, 2012). Additionally, there are multinational corporations that continue to exploit natural resources in the Caribbean and offer little benefit to these developing economies. The OWTU’s statement in April 1970 on the February Revolution is relevant and explains the continuing corruption, poor governance, and inefficiency: “... the government of the party in power and the yes-men and no-men of the parties in Parliament are pawns and play-things in the hands of the white, foreign

imperialist robbers and local capitalist swindlers who drain the wealth of our country abroad and take the cream of what stays at home.”

Party politics in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana are still mostly based on race and ethnicity. The influence of the United States media has had a disastrous impact, as many young West Indians have lost their identity and are strongly influenced by the dress, music, language, and values of Americans. For instance, in 2005, Daniel Gibson, a 28-year-old mechanic from Trinidad murdered his teenaged cousin, claiming that he became possessed by a demon from listening to rock music. Similarly, during 2006/2007, in a crime-ridden community in North Trinidad, there was a violent gang of teenaged criminals known as the “G-Unit,” patterned themselves on 50 Cent’s G-Unit, a rap group in the U.S., not a gang.⁹ Furthermore, some movies made in the U.S., such as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Juice*, have glorified violence and are appealing to Blacks in marginalized communities in Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, a significant percentage of talented and educated West Indians are part of the “brain drain,” as they annually seek jobs in developed countries. The masses in Trinidad and Tobago and other countries in the Global South still remain powerless and voiceless. Thus, there is need to restart the Black Power revolution or build another global movement to protect our citizens from uncaring governments and exploitation by multinational corporations.

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⁹ See Teelucksingh, 2009, pp. 78–80.

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