MOVING AGAINST THE SYSTEM

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The 1968 Congress of Black Writers and the Making of Global Consciousness

Edited and with
an Introduction by
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Introduction

THE DIALECT OF LIBERATION

The Congress of Black Writers at 50 — and Beyond

DAVID AUSTIN

For the black man in Canada, it was a stimulating and edifying experience. His only hope now lies in a new era of black militance and a new humanism. To quote Frantz Fanon, ". . . man is a *yes* . . . *Yes* to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity. But man is also a *no*. *No* to scorn of man. *No* to degradation of man. *No* to the exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom."

— Barbara Jones, "A Black Woman Speaks Out"

It is interesting to note the cross section of persons and organizations represented at the conference. This would tend to provide additional credence of the ties existing between the main subversive elements both here and in the United States as well. . . . It was not in fact a presentation of literature by Black Writers. It is believed that the outcome of this caucus was programmed well in advance and in fact was a deliberate attempt to further motivate dissension and subversion within the population.

— *Canadian state security (RCMP) Congress of Black Writers file*

Fifty years is not a long period in terms of historical time, but a great deal of history has unfolded since the epochal year 1968. Time, to use an obvious and perhaps outmoded cliché, is relative, and many of the central issues of that period still preoccupy us, and occupy a prominent place in contemporary geopolitics. The Congress of Black Writers was convened in 1968 in Montreal and was one of the most important black international gatherings of the post-Second World War period. But given the significance of black radical politics and movements for that era, the congress must also be understood as an important gathering in terms of left politics in general, and one whose impact was important for, but not limited to, people of African descent, not least because people of African descent live and act in this world. The world has changed significantly since that time, and the congress (and the year it occurred) is of great importance for our time.

Part of the event's relevance today lies in the fact that—in keeping with the dialectic of progression and regression—the circumstances and issues that brought the congress into being have not only survived into the present but are perhaps even more pronounced and acute today than they were fifty years ago. Because of this, the proceedings of the Congress of Black Writers, along with the tensions and contradictions that brought it into being, are important when thinking through the same political and socio-economic issues today.

The year 1968, it has been argued, represents the highpoint of a decade that was associated with several signature events: the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam and the general strike in France, which drew inspiration from the Vietnamese liberation struggle, and almost toppled the government of Charles de Gaulle[1]; the combination of anti-war protest and the Black Power movement, which fractured US society, just as the Cuban Revolution undermined US hegemony in the Americas. There were uprisings followed by suppressions in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the popular movement that would eventually topple the military government of Ayub Khan in Pakistan; the Biafra civil war that tore at the core of a fragile Nigerian nation as, from Algiers to Cape Town, the ghost of Frantz Fanon haunted the African continent; and there was the anti-colonial struggle to free Guinea-Bissau from Portuguese colonialism, which, it was hoped, would help pave the way for a new day on the continent, even as the scourge of white supremacy in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Mozambique persisted.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated in this infamous year, two deaths that, for many, demonstrated the folly of American democracy and the impossibility of achieving genuine freedom through con-

ventional means. By this time the Civil Rights movement had transitioned to Black Power as the dominant, or at least most vociferous, form of black struggle in the US, Canada, and the UK. Black athletes protested against racism during the Mexico Olympics (in the lead up to the Olympics, hundreds of students were killed by the Mexican authorities during the Tlatelolco Massacre). While Black Panther Party members patrolled the streets of Oakland in order to protect black civilians from police incursions, Quebec, and the city of Montreal in particular, became a hotbed of radical socialist and nationalist politics, in part inspired by Black Power and African liberation struggles.

As French Quebec grappled with 200 years of British and anglophone domination and struggled for economic, cultural, linguistic, and political self-determination, the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and anti-colonial theorists such as Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire, and, perhaps most important of all, Frantz Fanon circulated among the left in Montreal.[2] Indeed, Fanon's ideas entered North America via Quebec, where *Les damnés de la terre*, the French original of *The Wretched of the Earth*, found a home long before the first English translation. The emergence of Black Power in the United States profoundly influenced Quebec's independence movement, and particularly touched members of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), the militant separatist group that was responsible for a series of bomb attacks and other acts of violent protest in Quebec in the long 1960s. Two of the FLQ's leading figures sought to develop ties with Black Power figures in the United States, such as Stokely Carmichael,[3] and drew upon the ideas of Malcolm X who, allegedly made a brief visit to Montreal in January 1965 (we know with certainty that he made an appearance in Toronto on CBC's *Front Page Challenge* with Pierre Berton in the same month).[4]

In 1966, FLQ members Pierre Vallières and Charles Gagnon traveled to the US in order to make contact with Black Power and Puerto Rican militants with the goal of forming a nationalist front against colonial oppression.[5] They distributed a declaration in the United Nations headquarters concerning incarcerated FLQ members in Montreal and Quebec's decolonization movement.[6] They were eventually arrested by American authorities in New York and jailed in the Manhattan Detention Center for disturbing the peace,[7] but it was during his detention that Vallières wrote his most celebrated work, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique—The White Niggers of America*.[8] I have discussed this peculiarly Quebec conception of *nègres* in *Fear of a Black Nation*,[9] but in response to this problematic appropriation of black identity, the Congress of Black Writers co-chair Elder Thébaud retorted that, while it had become fashionable for French Quebecers to refer to themselves as Canada's *nègres blancs*, blacks were, to use a tautology, the real *nègres* in Canada and in the

world at large.[10] The US Black Power movement was central to Vallières' thinking, and yet, one could read in the FLQ theorist's book that "In Quebec the French Canadians are not subject to this irrational racism that has done so much wrong to the workers, white and black, of the United States. They can take no credit for that, since in Quebec there is no 'black problem.'"[11] As I have suggested elsewhere, we might rightly ask, if the "high priests" of the left-wing Quebec separatist movement, which owed so much to US Black Power, did not recognize racism right under their very noses—not to mention the almost total elision of the colonial condition of Indigenous peoples—what hope was there for the rest of Canada? But to his credit, Vallières later revised his views on the existence of racial discrimination in French Canada, including the plight of Canada's first peoples, who were colonized by both the French and the English.[12]

Black Montrealers were a component part of this politically charged atmosphere,[13] and while the congress co-chairs argued that the event could have been convened anywhere,[14] there were particular circumstances that conspired to bring it to Montreal. Vallières' remarks came at the very moment that Montreal's black population began to swell, initially as a result of the influx of women and men from the anglophone Caribbean, although Haitians would soon become the largest of the immigrant groups of African and Caribbean descent, as well as a population that consisted of women and men from the African continent and, to a lesser extent, the US in the form of African-American draft dodgers.[15] Each one of these groups sought a new life, and each brought with them their own peculiar cultural and political luggage as they settled alongside the pre-existing community of black Canadians that extended back to the period of slavery in Canada. This community had once included Louise Langdon Norton, or simply Louise Langdon, who emigrated from the Caribbean (St. Andrews, Grenada) to Montreal in the early twentieth century, where she met Earl Little, who had migrated from Georgia to Montreal in 1917.[16] Both were members of the Montreal chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL), a mass global black uplift organization founded by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, with an international following in North America, the African continent, the Caribbean, and Latin America (Cuba alone had some fifty chapters of the organization). The Montreal chapter of the UNIA was established informally in 1917 and then officially in 1919,[17] and as the Guyanese writer Jan Carew, who himself played an active role in the Congress of Black Writers, has written, "Louise Langdon, her husband Earl Little, as Garveyite devotees and new converts, laid the foundation on which all the succeeding Black Power movements in Canada and the United

States were built."[18] What at first sight might sound a touch hyperbolic in fact resonates with reality when we consider that Langdon and Little were the parents of Malcolm X, the single most significant influence on the Black Power movement in the 1960s. For Max Elbaum, writing in *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*, Malcolm's 1965 *Autobiography* was "without question the single most widely read and influential book among young people of all racial backgrounds who went to their first demonstration sometime between 1965 and1968."[19] Malcolm X was one of the most influential figures—and not only black figures—of the post-Second World War period and, other than Garvey himself, arguably no other twentieth-century black figure had a greater impact on the world stage than Malcolm, the son of Garveyite parents.

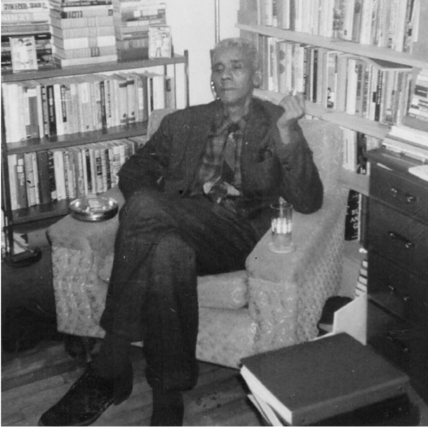
In the 1960s, the island of Montreal was Canada's economic and cosmopolitan cultural centre that still boasted a hopping jazz music scene (Montreal was the home of the great pianist Oscar Peterson). It attracted people from all over the world, including visitors to the International and Universal Exposition that was hosted by Montreal in 1967, otherwise known as Expo '67. These were heightened political times, and Caribbean and African-American cultural-political figures such as Harry Belafonte, Stokely Carmichael, Dick Gregory,[20] Lloyd Best, Richard B. Moore, C. L. R. James, Jan Carew, Mighty Sparrow, Austin Clarke, George Lamming, Orlando Patterson, Édouard Glissant, and Aimé Césaire, among others, visited the city on one occasion or more. This was the historical moment in which the Congress of Black Writers (October 11–14) was convened at McGill University, organized by a combination of Caribbean and black Canadian students from McGill and Sir George Williams universities (now Concordia University) and members of Montreal's wider black community. The four-day gathering was largely conducted in English, but it nonetheless brought Creole, French, and English speakers together in an attempt to address the impact of colonization and slavery and the rupture, fragmentation, dislocation, criminalization, and, of course, racialization of black lives. The congress thus represented an effort to purge the demons of the past—a kind of exercise in exorcism—and to chart a course that would transcend the social, political, and economic contradictions of the living present. In this spirit, the event's success lay in the fact that, on a local level, it fostered a renewed sense of community and purpose among blacks in Montreal, and to a lesser extent in Toronto and other Canadian cities, and served as an international locus that connected black political figures and movements in three continents.

For Yvonne Greer, who became active within Montreal's black community in the aftermath of the congress and the Sir George Williams University

protest, the event was "like going to a rock concert," philosophically adding that she cannot "think of anything positive that it wasn't" or "negative that it was."[21] The event might also be described as a kind of revival meeting organized to spur black Canadians into political action, or an exorcism of the pent up anguish and frustration that had accumulated after centuries of slavery, colonialism, and racial discrimination and exploitation. Nova Scotia's Burnley "Rocky" Jones described the event as "the most exciting time for black people in Canada" and the wider society was shocked at the presence of black political intellectuals in Canada and the expression of internationalism that connected blacks from around the world.[22] The shock was combined with a sense of dread, which resulted in co-ordinated state security measures to suppress the movement that this public display of black politics symbolized.

Genesis

The idea to organize a Congress of Black Writers was first proposed by Raymond Watts, a Trinidadian autodidact Marxist and musician who moved to Montreal from London to work as a train porter in order to support his family. Watts and fellow Trinidadian Wally Look Lai had been members of a study group that met in the London home of C. L. R and Selma James in the early sixties, a group that included young Caribbean intellectuals such as Jamaica's Joan French, Orlando Patterson, Richard Small, and briefly Robert Hill, and Walter Rodney of Guyana. But lacking the formal education of his peers, Watts often felt marginalized within the London group. He and Look Lai were later part of the Conference Committee on West Indian Affairs, otherwise known as the Caribbean Conference Committee (CCC), an important Montreal-based group that organized a series of conferences about the Caribbean between 1965 and 1967 that included the participation of several prominent Caribbean writers, artists, economists, and political figures, such as Jan Carew, Norman Girvan, Austin Clarke, Orlando Patterson, Lloyd Best, Richard B. Moore, and calypso singer Mighty Sparrow. Referring to the CCC during his keynote address at the inaugural conference, "The Shaping of the Future of the West Indies," the Barbadian novelist George Lamming praised the CCC for its work: "I would like . . . to let you know that what you are doing here tonight has many echoes in London and for many of your compatriots who work in various activities throughout Africa. You are in a sense operating on a world scale."[23] Lamming went on to declare: "I want also, I think, to congratulate you on what I believe is the first conference of this kind."[24]



C. L. R. James in the home of Alfie Roberts.
Alfie Roberts Collection

C. L. R. James served as a mentor to several CCC members who formed its Marxist-oriented affiliate, the C. L. R. James Study Circle (CLRJSC), established by Robert Hill, one of the CCC's founding members. At the time, Hill was a young Jamaican student, first at Carleton University in Ottawa and then the University of Toronto, and as a member of the CLRJSC and the Detroit-based Facing Reality group he took the initiative to publish James' study of the Hegelian logic and socialism, *Notes on Dialectics*, for the first time. Hill and the group's other core members—Alfie Roberts, Anne Cools, Tim Hector, Franklyn Harvey, and to a degree, Rosie Douglas—adopted James as a mentor, which resulted in a series of small classes on Marxism and politics that have since been published under the title *You Don't Play with Revolution: The Montreal Lectures of C. L. R. James.*[25] The group also organized a lecture tour for James that connected him to a new generation of students and young radicals in Canada and the US, including

George Lamming and Rosie Douglas (seated) at Caribbean Conference Committee event, 1965. Alfie Roberts Collection

CCC-CLRJSC members Franklyn Harvey, Robert Hill, Alfie Roberts, Tim Hector, in Montreal, ca. 1967. Alfie Roberts Collection

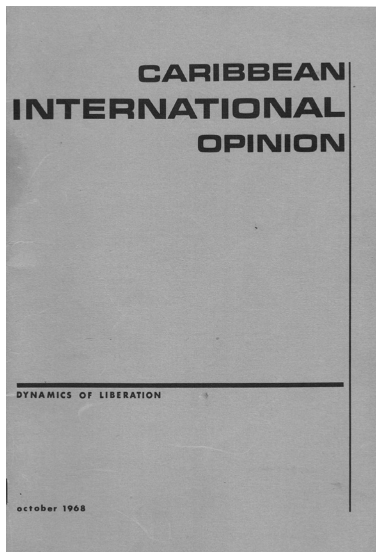
Stokely Carmichael and other figures within the Black Power and Black Studies movements.

The CCC-CLRJSC's work and relationship with James situated the group within a Caribbean radical and political-intellectual tradition. While a detailed outline of the significance of this point is beyond our scope here, it is important to note that, in many ways, the work of these "maroon intellectuals"—small political-intellectual groupings situated within the tradition of rebellious slaves who established autonomous settlements in the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas[26]—also helped birth what can justifiably be described as a Canadian dimension of the Caribbean Radical Tradition and what Cedric J. Robinson has described as the Black Radical Tradition that is rooted in the history of black resistance and "an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle."[27] In Robinson's view, this tradition manifested itself in the early twentieth century in the work of James, George Padmore, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Oliver Cox, a list to which we must add Claudia Jones, Elma Francois, Kathleen Cleaver, and Angela Davis, among others.[28] Since the publication of Robinson's classic book, the analysis of this tradition has been expanded in ways

that seriously consider the role of gender, the arts, and sexuality within this tradition,[29] all of which is important in terms of appreciating the legacy and significance of the congress today.

James' connection to the CCC also signified the passing of a torch of sorts from the older to the younger generation of Caribbean radicals. And while the CCC had essentially disbanded after its third conference in 1967, this by no means meant an end to the Caribbean group's collective work.[30] By then several members of its core, including the three H's (Hill, Harvey, and Hector), had returned to the Caribbean while Cools was sojourning in England (Roberts remained in Montreal), but the CCC's work continued through the work of Caribbean Nation (CN), which published a one-off issue of *Caribbean International: The Dynamics of Liberation Opinion*,[31] a revolutionary journal established by former CCC-CLRJSC members and the publication of which coincided with the convening of the 1968 Congress of Black Writers. In some respects, the CN journal represented a Caribbeanized rendition of *International African Opinion*, the pan-African journal edited by James in the 1930s in London for the International African Service Bureau (IASB), led by fellow Trinidadian George Padmore and involving Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ras Makonnen of Jamaica and Guayana respectively, and future African heads of state Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. In other words, not only did the CCC-CLRJSC and now CN work closely with James, but its members situated themselves within the political tradition of James and his fellow pan-Africanists in the 1930s.

Despite the fact that it was not a CCC event, its core members considered the congress to be the climax of the "consciousness-raising" activities[32] that the group had organized between 1965 and 1967, and Franklyn Harvey appears to have influenced the meeting's direction from Trinidad through his correspondence with Rosie Douglas.[33] As the subtitle of the congress and *Caribbean International Opinion* suggests—"The Dynamics of Black Liberation" and "The Dynamics of Liberation" respectively—the journal might perhaps be described as a Marxist-oriented complement to the growing sense of black nationalism and Black Power that the congress represented. The choice of titles could hardly have been coincidental and as the term "dynamic" implies, both the editors of the journal and the organizers of the congress imagined freedom as a process, riddled with tensions and contradictions out of which liberation took form, and in this sense, the term "dialectic" could have made a suitable substitute. In terms of the scope of the journal's content, in addition to the submissions by three former CCC-CLRJSC members—Alfie Roberts on sugar and the Caribbean revolution, Franklyn Harvey on the May 1968 revolts in France, and Tim Hector on the plight of



Caribbean International Opinion (cover).
Alfie Roberts Collection

the Vietnamese in both North and South Vietnam—it also contains two contributions by C. L. R. James, the first on political economy and the second entitled "State Capitalism and the French Revolutionary Tradition." Other contributors included two future Caribbean prime ministers: Arnim Eustace of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (listed as a member of the congress co-ordinating committee) who wrote about the economy of the Caribbean; Rosie Douglas who examined racism in Canada; S. (Stanley) Chiwaro of Zimbabwe (also a member of the congress co-ordinating committee) who discussed neo-colonialism in Africa; M. A. Farray on "The Historical Development of Capitalism and Its Effects on the New and Afro-Asian Worlds," M. Barrow on "Art and Bourgeois Reality," and Feleon on Haiti under François Duvalier.

The departure of several prominent members of the group to the Caribbean or England signaled the arrival of a new political sensibility among black and Caribbean women and men in Montreal and across Canada. A political shift began to take place among both Canadian-born blacks and Caribbean immigrants who increasingly drew inspiration from the Black Power movement, as they had before from the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Many in the growing Caribbean community began to turn their attention away from the region and toward the domestic needs of people of African descent in their adopted home. Between October 4 and 6, 1968, another outgrowth of the CCC, the Conference Committee, MTL (Caribbean and Other Black Organizations), otherwise known as the Canadian Conference Committee, organized a conference at Sir George Williams University focusing on "Problems of Involvement in the Canadian Society with Reference to the Black Peoples" under the leadership of, among others, Clarence Bayne, a Sir George Williams University economics professor from Trinidad, and the social worker and educator Dorothy Wills, originally from Dominica.[34] Guests included prominent African-Canadians, such as Dr. Howard McCurdy of Windsor University, US-native Daniel Hill, director of the Human Rights Commission of Ontario (also father to acclaimed

author of *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill), and the African-Canadian Richard Lord, who was then vice president of the Quebec Liberal Party. The conference consisted of workshops related to employment, housing, political, cultural, and social alienation, Black Power and economics in Canada, and poetry and drama.[35]

As the Jamaican sociologist Dennis Forsythe wrote, this conference was more "pragmatically rather than ideologically oriented—a fact deduced from its various resolutions and composition of its panelists, but since pragmatism is also part of the dialectics of change, we should give the conference due credit, if not for its achievements, then at least for its designs."[36] Several resolutions were passed during the meeting, including the call for the educated and professional blacks to play a more direct role in education and employability of members of the black community, and a demand for a Royal Commission to investigate the issue of black civil rights in Canada.[37] Most significantly, a resolution was passed that called for a national black organization capable of meeting the growing and changing needs of blacks across Canada. Within a year this group founded the National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC).[38]

But if the Canadian-focused conference was primarily pragmatic and local, the Congress of Black Writers was its opposite. Organized in Montreal the week after the Canadian-focused event at Sir George, the congress was ideologically driven by the spirit and force of radical Black Power politics, black nationalism, and black internationalism in ways that, judging from the extensive state security files on the event and those who organized and participated in it, clearly raised the alarm within the state security apparatus.[39] Raymond Watts envisioned the congress as part of the tradition that spawned the First and Second Congresses of Negro Writers and Artists (1956 and 1959 in Paris and Rome respectively) that brought together many of the leading African, African-American, and Caribbean intellectuals of the time, including Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Richard Wright, George Lamming, and Léopold Sédar Senghor.[40] In the end, the event was convened by a wider group of black students at McGill University and a co-ordinating committee that included students from Sir George Williams University and members of the wider black community that had been shifting in the direction of Black Power,[41] a shift that was captured in Canada by Austin Clarke's remarks about Martin Luther King Jr. Clarke's scathing critique of King's non-violent approach and what he described as moralistic attempts to appeal to the conscience of whites[42] was characteristic of a new phase in black struggle, the tenor and tone of which was reflected in the atmosphere of the congress, despite the fact that it was dedicated to the memories of both King and Malcolm X.