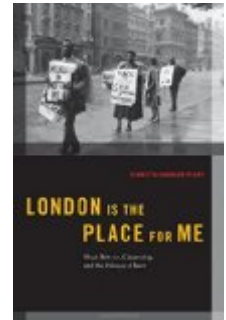


Kennetta Hammond Perry. *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race.* Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 336 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-024020-2.



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By now the narrative of immediate postwar black British history is a familiar one. It begins with the arrival of black migrants from the Caribbean colonies on the Empire Windrush in 1948, traces their experiences with discrimination in the 1950s, and ends with the indignity of the 1960s immigration acts and the conciliatory 1965 Race Relations Act. Yet in her excellent monograph, *London Is the Place for Me* (the latest offering in Oxford University Press's series Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities), Kennetta Hammond Perry demonstrates that there is far more to this story than we have hitherto recognized. In a detailed examination of the relationship between postwar politics and race, Perry explores how black political activists and their allies deliberately claimed and used their rights as British citizens, as well as their experience with the imperial and international diasporas, to expose the racist infrastructure of British politics and society and fundamentally reshape ideas about citizenship in Britain.

Perry opens with a compelling reinterpretation of a 1948 newsreel that depicts Trinidadian musician Aldwyn Roberts (Lord Kitchener) debuting his calypso "London Is the Place for Me" on the deck of the Empire Windrush. She argues that Kitchener's performance was a profound "moment of claim making" (p. 3). As she explains, calypso had long been the political voice of the Caribbean people, and upon his arrival in London Kitchener deliberately used this voice to assert not only his British identity but also his rights as a British citizen. And he was not alone. In six jam-packed chapters, Perry goes on to consider how in the 1950s and 1960s black activists involved themselves in the British political process, creating and using a myriad of local organizations and overseas networks to deliberately challenge assumptions about everything from black masculinity and housing inequality to British antiracism.

As Perry explains, her work contributes to two intertwining histories: that of blacks as historical agents in Britain and the story of how black and

white Britons dealt with racist ideas about British citizenship in the postwar period. She uses a wide variety of sources—from traditional archival documents to oral histories, newspapers, and images—to build on recent studies that have explored metropolitan decolonization and the formation of black British identity in the imperial and interwar context. Through her close attention to the rhetoric of activists and public officials and her detailed accounts of their actions on the ground, Perry makes it abundantly clear that black Britons' grassroots activism was deliberately political, and a force to be reckoned with.

In her early chapters, Perry draws together the findings of such historians as Brian Moore, Michele Johnson, Laura Tabili, and Lara Putnam to highlight continuities in black Britons' approaches to activism, from the colonies in the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth-century era of decolonization in Britain itself. Chief among these continuities were black people's political self-awareness and their use of Britishness to advocate for "political empowerment" (p. 37). Perry points out that as early as 1905 black Jamaican writer Theophilus Scholes declared that "coloured members of the British empire ... [were] not subjects of the colorless" but shared with them the rights of Britons (p. 38). It was that understanding that Caribbean colonials brought with them to Britain and began using decades before the Windrush docked. Perry demonstrates that black Britons of all classes continued to use strategies based on their British rights into the postwar period, often guided by activists and policymakers (such as Amy Ashwood Garvey and Learie Constantine) whose involvement spanned the interwar and postwar eras.

Perry positions the reader to go beyond the more usual focus on social and cultural history to consider the politics of Caribbean migration, citizenship, and race as black activists understood and used them. Central to their understanding, Perry

argues, was black Britons' belief that political work in Britain regarding citizenship and belonging "was not simply a domestic affair" but drew from and had an impact on the African diaspora, particularly in the Atlantic world (p. 9). She thus considers activists' work in the domestic, colonial, and international contexts even as she focuses on their reactions to events in Britain.

A good example is her compelling exploration of the racist violence in Notting Hill and Nottingham in 1958 and 1959 (events that have been overdue for such detailed analysis). It is well known that British officials blamed—largely successfully—the Notting Hill riots on "deviants" who they argued were not representative of the British people. Perry digs deeper to reveal the degree to which the state's defensive posture was a response to international, and indeed, colonial pressure deliberately invoked by black activists. At a time when desegregation battles in the United States and apartheid in South Africa were drawing worldwide attention, both the 1958 riots and the 1959 murder of Kelso Cochrane in London threatened to seriously damage Britain's international reputation as an antiracist society. Black Britons recognized this, and as Perry shows us, they drew on their experiences and contacts beyond the Mother Country (most notably in the Caribbean and the United States) to heighten international and colonial pressure so that, even as they denied British racism existed, policymakers could not dismiss the racial significance of the violence.

Perry also provides us with a masterful analysis of the development of what she terms the "British anti-racist mystique" (the widely accepted myth that there was no native British racism) and its importance to policymakers. Although cynicism and expediency were significant elements of British politicians' desire to maintain this mystique, Perry makes it clear that for some in power (on both sides of the aisle) the idea of an equal, multiracial commonwealth had real meaning and

value. Thus when black activists deliberately began to counter this myth by drawing attention to the structural racism it masked, they could not, in good conscience, look away. Through such organizations as the Inter-Racial Friendship Coordinating Council (IRFCC) and the short-lived but significant Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) activists thus held policymakers' feet to the fire by highlighting the reality that belied their idealized image of Britain. By the early 1960s, they had forced state officials to formally acknowledge British racism for the first time.

Throughout her book, Perry works through the process of political activism, rather than simply seeking the reasons for the apparent failure or success of activists' work. This approach allows her to repeatedly expand our understanding of familiar events, even as she reveals their broader political meanings and consequences. So, for example, as she describes who did what, when, and where, it becomes increasingly obvious that black women were central to the fight against British racism in this era, both as leaders and foot soldiers—something that has not up to now drawn much attention. And in focusing on the day-to-day work of those who fought against the 1962 Immigration Act (the “losers”) rather than those who created the bill (the “winners”), she reveals something else that has thus far largely gone unnoticed. It was, she suggests, activists' insistence that the 1962 act was essentially disenfranchisement (along with their employment of a variety of well-known leaders—from the American Martin Luther King Jr. to the Jamaican politician Alexander Bustamante—to apply international pressure) that made it impossible for British officials to avoid public awareness of the link between race and immigration upon which the act was based. And while they could not prevent the bill's passage into law, black activists and their allies also brought to public consciousness the idea that mobility was a key British right, even as it was being deliberately denied to many colonial subjects of

color.

Like the activists she studies, Perry clearly feels comfortable moving across national boundaries as well as employing a variety of analytical tools. Her flexible approach serves as an excellent model of how to effectively follow a story where it leads rather than artificially separating material into national, imperial, or diasporic boxes. With that said, there are times that the wealth of detail Perry presents makes one's head spin. I, for one, would have found a list of organizations and activists extremely helpful. Indeed, Perry's work is so rich that at times she seems to trip over her own words. However, close reading untangles the knots and the clarity of her insights more than makes up for the occasionally convoluted nature of her prose. Moreover, the details of the story she tells—her attention to how issues as diverse as how gender assumptions and overseas interpretations of British immigration law affected the relationship between race and citizenship rights—serves to drive home the need for further attention to this complex subject.

Through Perry's eyes, we watch black activists and their allies, deliberately and with considerable skill, “own” their Britishness and use it to push white British policymakers—and the public—toward a recognition (limited though it may have been) that British racism existed, and furthermore, that it was based on assumptions of white supremacy, rather than being a problem created by the movement of black bodies or some kind of deviant black masculinity. Sadly, it seems we must repeatedly relearn this lesson. Reading Perry's work, it is impossible not to see the parallels between postwar Britain and our own era, when so many of the powers that be (in Britain and beyond) attack migrants as the enemy while continuing to ignore the insidious influence of structural racism. Thus, as well as being a vital contribution to the history of black Britons and the postwar world, *London Is the Place for Me*

serves to remind us that the fight these black British activists engaged in with such creativity and resolve is far from over.

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