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'Blacks have no powerful press, control no broadcasting stations, sit in no parliaments of the world, and therefore have no means of voicing their grievances.'¹ So wrote George Padmore in *How Britain Rules Africa*, published in 1936, when Europeans still ruled nearly the whole of Africa. A Black Trinidadian, Padmore had already dedicated a decade of his young life to giving voice to Blacks' grievances. As a student in the United States, he had written and edited for communist publications. Relocating in Moscow and Hamburg, he had recruited Africans for the Communist International and edited the *Negro Worker*, publishing not only his own views but those of vigorous leaders from across the African continent: Johnstone (Jomo) Kenyatta of Kenya, I. T. A. Wallace Johnson of Sierra Leone, and Garan Kouyaté, born in the French Sudan and educated in Senegal. What Brent Hayes Edwards has written of Padmore's collaboration with Kouyaté could be said of them all: through 'print culture' they participated in 'a nascent discourse of black internationalism – spaces of independent thinking, alternative modes of expression and dissemination'.²

In the cities of Europe and America these Black men from the colonies found freedom of speech unavailable at home. Parting ways with the Comintern in 1934, Padmore lived at first in Paris, then the next year moved to London, where he became the centre of a shifting band of associates that for more than twenty years would mount a struggle for recognition, visibility, and the right to be seen as political agents of their own destiny. Publishing in the very headquarters of the British Empire, Padmore and his allies could speak directly to power, but they could speak also to readers in colonies that were often in closer communication with London than with each other. They wrote articles for an array of publications distributed on several continents. With the help of the English women in their lives, they wrote books and got them published. They produced pamphlets and short-lived periodicals that they smuggled into the colonies. On multiple fronts they challenged Britons' view of themselves as benevolent colonisers, carrying out a civilising mission in Africa.

An indefatigable networker, Padmore moved through time and place collecting talent for this anti-colonial publishing campaign: the young South African writer Peter Abrahams and the Gold Coast's Kwame Nkrumah, who would later lead his country to independence as Ghana; the African Americans W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard

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Wright. Together, these writers struggled against marginalisation in what Jürgen Habermas has called the 'public sphere'. In Habermas's view, the bourgeois public sphere, as it developed separately in Great Britain, France, and Germany, was that arena of discourse where private citizens of a nation-state held 'public authority' accountable to the public.³ Padmore and his associates were not true citizens of any nation-state – their very goal was to become citizens. Thus, ability to speak in a public sphere so defined was problematic. Like other groups that have battled their way into print, they found an entry point here, another there, working their way in from the margins of what amounted to a transnational public sphere.⁴

Did what they say make a difference? Officials kept watch on them as if it did, collecting their publications in London and sometimes banning them in the colonies. Whatever the effect their writing actually had on the readers they reached – and that is not easy to assess – the process of writing and publishing, especially against the odds, had an incalculable effect on the community itself.⁵ Writing and publishing together shored up these nationalists' own faith that they could bring about – in Benedict Anderson's resonant phrase – their 'imagined community': a world free of European rule.⁶

For Padmore, at least, the imagined community was always larger than a nation-state, larger even than the West African union or the United States of Africa that Nkrumah pressed for. A West Indian who had journeyed far from home, Padmore imagined a world without empires, a postcolonial world. For rule over one particular country to be seen as illegitimate, rule of any country by another had to be seen as illegitimate. Commonly identified in years to come as a Pan-Africanist, Padmore had broader concerns: he ferreted out colonial rulers' misdeeds and news of revolt in virtually all corners of the imperial world, from India to the Gold Coast to Trinidad, and distributed these reports on several continents. He not only aimed to unite the colonised against the colonisers; he aimed also to undermine Western faith in the rightness and inevitability of colonial rule.

In his introduction to *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, Bill Schwarz has pointed out the absence among the photographs of West Indians arriving in Britain during the 1950s of 'reverse-shots, in which ... we see, through the eyes of the emigrant, the huddles of journalists and onlookers, police and social workers, white faces all'.⁷ Padmore and his companions did not so much offer reverse-shots of the British people as of their Empire, presenting it from the point of view of the colonised. They who had been objects, spoken about, looked down upon, pitied, or maligned, had become subjects. Studies of social movements have highlighted this pivotal moment when those before

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rendered silent find their way to speech, asserting themselves as actors in the public sphere, agents of their own history. In her contribution to the collection *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements*, Anne Phillips writes, 'Oppressed or subordinated groups have to be able to find their own voice, to speak for themselves, to be recognised as active participants'.⁸ The experience of the Padmore circle suggests how difficult that process can be.

Intellectual histories too often ignore the web of practical considerations that lead to published texts, for instance, writers' need for income and access to publishers, editors, and agents – all gatekeepers who may block the way or nudge the printed product this way or that according to their own predilections or worries about anticipated reviews, libel law, or political consequences, which in the colonial world could include bans on book sales. Writing from the political margins, members of Padmore's ragtag London community faced a particularly hard struggle to be heard beyond the alternative public sphere created through their own publications or the publications of other marginal groups. As Black writers, they were oddities; their racial identity could count against them, although sometimes it helped: authors' pictures, editors' notes, and book jackets signalled to readers that theirs were uncommon voices.

While they appeared to share a racial identity, their collective political identity was a work in progress. Unity within any movement is subject to negotiation; there is within any collective action, to use Alberto Melucci's terms, a 'plurality of possible meanings'.⁹ Neither Kenyatta nor Padmore's old friend C. L. R. James was on the same political page as Padmore in the 1930s and both moved farther from him as the years wore on; Padmore eventually came to see his onetime ally Peter Abrahams as a political enemy. Partha Chatterjee's remark that revolutions proceed along a 'crooked line' applies to this political community as it moved through time. 'It is in the shifts, slides, discontinuities, the unintended moves, what is suppressed as much as what is asserted, that one can get a sense of this complex movement', Chatterjee writes in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*,¹⁰ as if movements were rivers with currents running above and below, eddying here around a rock, running off unexpectedly into a backwater.

To convey the intricate motion of lives and relationships behind this movement's published work, the narrative that follows draws on correspondence and other unpublished materials to discover not only what was public and generally known but also what was private or deliberately held secret. The story begins on the rocky stretch that Padmore's first post-Comintern book travelled towards publication

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and continues with the formal organisation of the International African Service Bureau in London before the Second World War. The London community dispersed during the war, although Padmore went on working in London, sending out news stories and writing books, while newcomer Peter Abrahams braved difficult wartime publishing conditions to make his way into print. After the war, with Abrahams's and Kwame Nkrumah's help, Padmore organised the Fifth Pan-African Congress, which energised London-based efforts for independence in Africa.

After Nkrumah and Kenyatta returned to Africa to build movements there, they knew that Padmore, back in London, would publicise their activities and any efforts to suppress them. Kenyatta found his way blocked, but Nkrumah emerged from prison to become head of what would, in a few years, become an independent government. Padmore sent regular London despatches to Nkrumah's party newspaper and wrote a book, *The Gold Coast Revolution*, meant to inspire nationalists elsewhere in Africa. He also encouraged Richard Wright to write his own book on the Gold Coast, *Black Power*. Although Padmore and Wright supported each other in their writing efforts, US State Department documents reveal that Wright became a secret informant for the United States government, providing information about Padmore's relationship with Nkrumah. Abrahams more openly went his own way, separating himself from the circle around Padmore and eventually writing a bitter *roman à clef*, *A Wreath for Udomo*. Published before Ghana's independence, it proved uncannily accurate in one respect: like the character for whom he served as a model, Padmore found himself beleaguered in the new Africa. By the close of his days in 1959, the union the members of his community had forged in London was ended, but so were the days of Empire as they had known it.

Documenting the twists and turns of the publishing path this political community took towards independence would have been easier if its most prolific member, George Padmore, had not published over such farflung territory. While I have explored publications where I knew that he published articles regularly, other scholars are likely to come across the Padmore byline in publications I have not mentioned, especially in African newspapers not yet available in searchable fulltext databases. Similarly, future scholars may put together a fuller picture of reader and reviewer response to the writings of his London-based community. Piecing together the informal relationships facilitating this community's publishing ventures would also have been easier if Padmore had not been so given to destroying his own records, as his longtime companion Dorothy Pizer lamented when she began

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collecting materials for a biography of him after his death. Substantial sets of letters from Padmore do survive, however, in collections of other people's correspondence, many of them made available since James R. Hooker brought out his early biography of Padmore in 1967 – *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism*.

With support from Indiana University, I was able to explore these collections in archives and libraries scattered across several continents. Padmore's and Pizer's detailed and intimate letters to Richard and Ellen Wright proved particularly helpful, and I am grateful to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University for making them available to me. The Kwame Nkrumah collection at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University contains letters from Padmore to Nkrumah that provide irrefutable evidence of Padmore's significance as Nkrumah's adviser. The St Clair Drake Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture enabled me both to understand Drake's role as the London community's first historian and to draw on his findings. Publishers' archives proved invaluable for tracing the publishing backstory. The C. L. R. James Collection at the University of the West Indies at St Augustine provided not only insights into James's activities but also material James collected for his proposed biography of Padmore. While I was writing this book, the Lilly Library at Indiana University purchased a small but useful set of James's correspondence in private hands, a reminder that more correspondence may turn up yet.¹¹

The database of scanned Communist International documents and the microfilmed Communist Party USA collection at the Library of Congress enlarged my awareness of Padmore's communist years when he formed relationships that became important in London, sharpened his skills, and earned his permanent mistrust of communism. Although a full exploration of those years fell outside the scope of this study (as did a full exploration of Padmore's final service in Ghana), I did spend significant research time piecing together Padmore's pre-London life, the foundation on which he built his later work as a political writer. In his American communist publications and the *Negro Worker*, I saw the energy and skill that manifested itself later in London. I also saw evidence of American officials' early interest in Padmore. Surveillance, censorship, and other government attempts to silence him and his circle constitute a dominant theme in this book. Consequently, I mined Department of State records at the US National Archives and travelled to The National Archives at Kew to explore Colonial Office files, which included the Metropolitan Police's surveillance reports on the International African Service Bureau. A 2005 release of British

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intelligence records added further weight to the already ample record of official surveillance and concern about the influence of Padmore and his allies.

I thank all the archives and libraries for preserving these collections, and I thank their staff members for their courteous assistance. In a Sources section at the end of the book, I have listed those collections whose documents I used in the book, but I also appreciate the assistance I received from librarians at other collections which I explored but did not draw on in the book. I thank, too, those librarians at Indiana University's Herman B. Wells Library who handled countless interlibrary loan requests and helped me in other ways throughout this project.

I owe special gratitude to Padmore's daughter, Blyden Cowart (named for Edward Wilmot Blyden, the distinguished nineteenth-century diplomat and author), who provided information and copies of Padmore's family letters, now deposited at the University of the West Indies at St Augustine. I appreciate, too, her permission to quote from Padmore's unpublished correspondence. At the start of my research, conversations with several scholars already working in this field – Richard Rathbone, Marika Sherwood, and Hakim Adi – strengthened my confidence that this project was well worth the investment of time it would take. I am grateful, too, for the ongoing encouragement of Edwin Wilson, a Virginian who has shared with me his knowledge and artefacts of the African diaspora, including a tape of C. L. R. James giving a talk; from then on, when I read James's published words, I heard the measured lilt of his voice. At a 2003 conference on George Padmore at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, where scholars and labour union members came together to honour his memory, Ed Wilson and I accompanied another attendee to James's grave, its stone bearing the cautionary words, 'Times would pass. Old Empires would fall and new ones take their place ...'

Toward the end of my writing, Grace Lee Boggs, who knew several members of this community well and was involved in producing one of their publications, shared her recollections and helped me put into better perspective the limitations of James's and Padmore's understanding of Africa's future. Long before I began work on this book, the former Padmore and Nkrumah ally Joe Appiah and his wife, Peggy, gave me tea in their Kumasi home, providing another living link to the past I have reconstructed mostly from documents.

My reconstruction is, of course, partial. I have focused on some members of this community more than others and left out peripheral figures that I might have put in if I were writing a book of unlimited length. In crafting the narrative, I have tried to suggest the elasticity

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of the topic: the events and conversations I describe are by necessity representative, implying rather than encompassing the dense network of relationships that sustained publication. For feedback on my narrative, I thank my Indiana University colleagues Radhika Parameswaran and Phyllis Martin; Clifton C. Hawkins, a thoughtful scholar of Black radicalism in the United States; my brother, William Claxon, a faculty member at the University of South Carolina Aiken; and my daughter, Cora Polsgrove. Finally, I am grateful to my parents, Emma and Neville Claxon, for taking me to Ghana in 1948, as Kwame Nkrumah was making his bid for power, and giving me an African childhood.

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Notes

- 1 George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* (London: Wishart Books, 1936), pp. 390–1.
- 2 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 265.
- 3 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 25–6.
- 4 Nancy Fraser's 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992), helped me see what they were doing in these terms.
- 5 For a study of how the process of publishing helps groups outside the mainstream forge their own identity see Susan Herbst, *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially chapter 1, 'Politics, Expression, and Marginality'.
- 6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1983).
- 7 Bill Schwarz, 'Introduction: Crossing the Seas', in Bill Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.
- 8 Anne Phillips, 'Recognition and the Struggle for Political Voice', in Barbara Hobson (ed.), *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities, Agency and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 265.
- 9 Alberto Melucci, 'Introduction', *Nomads of the Present* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 28.
- 10 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. vii.
- 11 A C. L. R. James collection at Columbia University, not yet open to scholars when this book went to press, is likely to add useful insights.