

Radiation and the Question of Power: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for Chaguaramas

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In 1958, the nuclear age arrived in Trinidad with the clandestine construction of a Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) radar station at the US Navy base in Chaguaramas. Located at a far corner of Trinidad's Northwest Peninsula, the tracking station began operations in February 1959 as one node in a transatlantic network that included installations in Greenland, Yorkshire, Alaska, and New Jersey. For US military officials, Trinidad appeared well suited for an operation whose secrecy was paramount. In the Caribbean, they believed efforts to track and intercept Soviet ballistic missiles would remain hidden from view.

After World War II, the unspeakable images of fallout in Hiroshima and Nagasaki generated new fears over the effects of radioactive material. Fallout is, indeed, an “invention of the nuclear age,” since the detonation of an atomic bomb scatters radioactive debris over an extended radius.¹ In Trinidad, an island fifty miles long and thirty-five miles wide, a secret tracking station could only remain secret for so long. Rumors spread from local laborers employed by the US base at Chaguaramas. First, whispers of “lead-lined chambers” at the Tucker Valley tracking station site leaked to the general public. The dramatic increase in the base's use of electrical power set off alarms as well. Electricity consumption on the base more than doubled, from

¹ Joseph Masco, *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive Worldmaking* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 20.

1,080 kilovolt-amperes (kVA) in September 1958 to 2,770 kVA in May 1959.² Finally, reports that a seagull died midflight as it passed over the BMEWS radar dish stoked anxieties about radiation and the threat to human and animal life on the island.

The people of Trinidad were not unacquainted with matters of energy and power. After commercial oil operations began in 1908, Trinidad rose to prominence as the largest supplier of oil to the British Royal Navy. In 1937, oilfield workers launched a general strike that brought the island to a standstill. Ordinary laborers understood the essential nature of their work to the British Empire as war loomed in Europe. One of the strikers' chief demands was self-government. From the shopfloor conferences of rigmen and refinery operators, the fossil power of hydrocarbons fueled West Indians' awareness of their own power.

In the nuclear age, Trinidadians' understanding of these matters extended into another theater of energy. Unlike oil, radiation was an invisible force that did not lend itself easily to work stoppages or popular claims-making. But as the tracking station began operations, communication leaks from the base proceeded up the chain from local employees to the ministers and premier of Trinidad and Tobago, the colonial governor, and, at last, Her Majesty's Government in London. After the passage of the British Caribbean Federation Act in 1956, the people of Trinidad and the West Indies awaited the arrival of independence under the flag of the West Indies Federation. In 1958, leaders of the federation had declared their preference for Chaguaramas to serve as the future federal capital. With the promise of West Indian independence staked directly to Chaguaramas, the US Navy base emerged as a target of anticolonial agitation. At this moment, rumors about a secret military installation and the hazards of radiation converged with the desires for independence held by Trinidadian officials and ordinary people alike.

The Trinidadian Marxist polymath C. L. R. James covered the radiation controversy for *The Nation*, the party organ of the People's National Movement (PNM). James had returned to Trinidad in 1958 at the invitation of his former student, the chief minister of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams. Under Williams, he served as editor of *The Nation*, which he conceived as an indispensable link between the party leadership and the citizen masses. For James, the success or failure of West Indian independence would rest on the success or failure of *The Nation*: "Independence must mean a new stage, the independence of ideas, the establishment of our independent state on sound and durable lines. Independence would be a farce and would bring unsuspected dangers if this domination of foreign ideas continued. Independence must mean the independent production of ideas to whatever degree adapted from elsewhere, their independent printing and publication in the West Indies. This is no ideal. It is a necessity."³

2 Sir Edward Beetham to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NA).

3 C. L. R. James, "The Report on *The Nation*, Nov. 1958–Dec. 1960," box 6, folder 136, C. L. R. James Collection, Alma Jordan Library, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

James understood the task of the party newspaper as greater than publicizing party activities under the premier and the Legislative Council. During his editorship, *The Nation* published fiction and poetry, commentaries on popular culture, calypso, and carnival, and weighed in on debates over the captaincy of the West Indies cricket team and a scheduled Test series in apartheid South Africa. With independence on the horizon, political education necessitated the communication of federal matters to rank-and-file readers and the recognition of the wisdom already present among West Indian people. In other words, the party newspaper had to clearly articulate its aims and proposals “so that the ordinary worker or rural member can *know* what the General Council is proposing to the Party to do.”⁴ But it also needed to strengthen the bond between the party and its membership, the state and the masses.

This demanded that the newspaper remain attentive to the colloquial registers of “ole talk” at rum shops, on street corners, and in public squares as the foundation of anticolonial politics. The communication of party business, then, was secondary to the goal of cultivating a popular democratic base for the mass party. In the dialectic between the party and the people, the latter had to take the lead. As James later put it in his reflections on *The Nation*’s successful campaign to appoint Frank Worrell as the first Black West Indian to captain a Test series: “The general public read with deep satisfaction. It saw in print what it wanted expressed.”⁵ In his conviction that political wisdom pervades the common sense of ordinary people, James guided *The Nation* toward a recognition of the power of the West Indian people.

While later writings on James discuss the matter of Worrell’s cricket captainship and his related offerings in *The Nation* at length, none have situated his commentaries on the radiation controversy alongside his perspectives on the party form and the question of power in the Caribbean.⁶ In his writings on Chaguaramas, we observe the synthesis of a Jamesian perspective on power. The question of power was twofold. For James, the power of radiation emanating from the US Navy base sparked a collective consciousness of the power wielded by ordinary people. Rather than collaborating with colonial authorities to remedy public anxieties over radiation, James insisted that the mass party must exalt the radiation saga as a foundational expression of working-class self-organization in the West Indies.

In critical surveys of James’s oeuvre, much has been made of his practices of annotation and revision. Throughout his life, he frequently revisited his signature works to insert targeted revisions or draft new prefaces and appendices to subsequent editions.⁷ For David Scott, his

4 C. L. R. James, *Party Politics in the West Indies* (San Juan: Vedic, 1962), 56.

5 C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 249.

6 See, for example, David Featherstone, Christopher Gair, Christian Høgsbjerg, and Andrew Smith, eds., *Marxism, Colonialism, and Cricket: C. L. R. James’s “Beyond a Boundary”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

7 Of particular note here is Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard’s revelation of an unpublished alternative ending to James’s only novel, *Minty Alley*, drafted circa 1960. As Parsard observes, “*Minty Alley* is a meditation on the capacities of West Indian working people a century after emancipation, and James’s ongoing experiments with the novel are a reconsideration of this question on the eve of independence.” Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard, “An Alternative Ending to *Minty Alley*,” *PMLA* 140, no. 1 (2025): 105. On the relationship of James’s early fiction to his political writings of the same period, see also Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard, “Barrack Yard Politics: From C. L. R. James’s *The Case for West Indian Self Government to Minty Alley*,” *Small Axe*, no. 57 (November 2018): 13–27.

revisions to the original 1938 text of *The Black Jacobins* for the second edition published in 1963 convey a change in political mood from anticolonial romance to postcolonial tragedy.⁸ Others follow James himself by underlining a shift in focus from revolutionary leaders to the “chorus [of] ex-slaves” across several revisions and performances of his stage play of the same title.⁹ This narrative innovation parallels James’s ideological drift from a doctrine of vanguard leadership to his evangelism of working-class self-organization.¹⁰ However, this drift did not occur in isolation from the political currents of the same period, where rumors of radiation imparted new lessons on the question of power.

For James, the struggle for Chaguaramas demonstrated that the scientific fact of radiation remained secondary to the *political* fact of radiation. Whether or not the presence of dangerous levels of radiation could be confirmed by technical observers or experts, popular belief in the reality of radiation generated vernacular theories of radiant power and political power alike. A neglected category in studies of Jamesian political philosophy, the political fact bears a resemblance to recent renderings of conspiracy theory as a vibrant “interpretive frame . . . to overcome the opacity and historical embeddedness of powerful entities.”¹¹ Differently from conspiracy theory, though, political fact is less preoccupied with unveiling hidden truths of powerful entities than with evangelizing the power of those who testify to the thinly veiled truths it beholds. This dual meaning of power—of radiation waves and of the colonial masses’ popular will—forms the basis of political fact as a contest over power in the colonial West Indies.

From Chaguaramas to Federation

The US military occupation of Trinidad began in the throes of the Second World War. In September 1940, the United States and United Kingdom struck a deal in which the United States transferred fifty warships to the British Royal Navy in exchange for land rights to British possessions. Under the terms of the “destroyers-for-bases” agreement, the United States established military bases at nine locations in North America and the Caribbean. In Trinidad, the Americans entered a rent-free ninety-nine-year lease to erect a naval base at Chaguaramas. Construction of the base began in 1941, bringing with it an influx of American soldiers immortalized by Lord Invader’s calypso standard, “Yankee Dollar.” Until the end of the war, US troops (including a significant number of African American GIs) descended on the British

8 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

9 C. L. R. James, “Lectures on *The Black Jacobins*,” *Small Axe*, no. 8 (September 2000): 111. See Rachel Douglas, *Making the Black Jacobins: C. L. R. James and the Drama of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

10 See Matthew Quest, “On ‘Both Sides’ of the Haitian Revolution? Rethinking Direct Democracy and National Liberation in *The Black Jacobins*,” in Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, eds., *The Black Jacobins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 235–55.

11 Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen, “Introduction: Conspiracy/Theory,” in J. Masco and L. Wedeen, eds., *Conspiracy/Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), 14.

West Indies with military standing and spending power that “ensured their ubiquity and import” on the local scene.¹²

Trinidad occupied a strategic position for the Allies as a supplier of oil from its crude reserves and refineries. Outside of the European front, battles raged in the Caribbean as German U-boats and Italian submarines sought to disrupt Allied oil shipments and trade routes in the Atlantic. In Trinidad, the tensions reached an apex in February 1942, when U-161 torpedoed a cargo ship, *Mokihana*, and an oil tanker, *British Council*, in the Port of Spain harbor. When the Allies prevailed in Europe in 1945, most US troops withdrew from the Caribbean theater. However, the United States retained its naval base at Chaguaramas under the terms of the 1941 agreement.

The postwar tide of anticolonial nationalism placed Chaguaramas in the sights of West Indian politicians and patriots. In 1946, the introduction of adult suffrage in Trinidad and Tobago permitted voters to elect nine representatives to the local Legislative Council. Constitutional reforms expanded the number of elected seats to eighteen in 1950 and twenty-four in 1956.¹³ In January 1956, the PNM formed with Williams as its leader. Running on a nationalist democratic platform, the PNM won thirteen contests in the 1956 council elections. With a narrow majority of seats on the Legislative Council, the PNM formed the first party government in Trinidad and Tobago with Williams as its chief minister.

As the march continued toward independence, the West Indies Standing Federation Committee convened in Jamaica in 1957. A closed vote selected Trinidad as the site for a federal capital. Williams did not participate in the vote. Surveys later identified Chaguaramas as the preferred location in Trinidad; the committee issued its recommendation that the US base be turned over to the Federation Government.¹⁴ Initially, Williams was reluctant to press the matter with Washington. But the bullishness of his Barbadian and Jamaican compatriots, Grantley Adams and Norman Manley, compelled Williams to take a stronger stance on Chaguaramas. At a July 1957 summit with the Eisenhower administration held in London, Williams condemned the 1941 agreement as an affront to West Indian sovereignty. Armed with the correspondence of former governor of Trinidad, Hubert Young, Williams revealed that Young had opposed the location of the base in Chaguaramas and had proposed instead a military installation in the Caroni region of central Trinidad. By closing ranks with the Federation Committee, Williams firmly linked the pursuit of independence to the reclamation of Chaguaramas. But, at this point, he understood Chaguaramas as a matter to be resolved through diplomatic talks. After the London conference, Williams proposed a joint commission of the United States, United

12 Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 8.

13 Bridget Brereton, *An Introduction to the History of Trinidad and Tobago* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1996), 99.

14 Spencer Mawby, “‘Uncle Sam, We Want Back We Land’: Eric Williams and the Anglo-American Controversy over the Chaguaramas Base, 1957–1961,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 126.

Kingdom, West Indies Federation, and Trinidad governments to revise the terms of the 1941 destroyers-for-bases deal and identify a new location for the US base on Trinidadian soil.¹⁵

Rumors of Radiation

In February 1959, the BMEWS radar station came online at the US Navy base in Chaguaramas. Meanwhile, the people of Trinidad and Tobago took to the road for Carnival. After the conclusion of the pre-Lenten bacchanal, C. L. R. James rendered his observations in a special entry for *The Nation*. His long-form article, “Independence, Energy and Creative Talent of Carnival Can Do Other Wonders,” held up the aesthetic dimensions of Carnival costumery and calypso composition to foreground the labor of the annual road march. Countering those who dismissed Carnival as immoral, hedonistic, or wasteful, James documented the countless hours of preparation that give rise to Carnival as a form of work that is motivated by the masquerade itself—“work purely for the love of it”—rather than the accumulation of capital and profit. In the aftermath of Carnival in 1959, James anticipated that this incredible display of self-organization might surface once again beyond the pre-Lenten season: “We can be certain that the energy, the creativity and the capacity for independent organization which they show in Carnival will very easily be transferred to another object. We can see in Carnival the possibility, (we do not go any further than possibility) of such a national mobilization, as would put to shame all efforts that have hitherto been made in industrial and social activity.”¹⁶

Classified dispatches from London to Washington reveal that British and American officials, too, understood the power of the West Indian people. On 10 June 1959, the Foreign Office relayed the concerns of Trinidad’s colonial governor and premier to their American counterparts. With the British government previously oblivious to the Americans’ tracking station, the Foreign Office requested clarity on the nature and extent of the installations and whether nuclear-powered submarines were stationed at Chaguaramas. Moreover, the memo lent credence to the rumors in Trinidad when it told of “reports of a reliable nature that radiation was taking place from some point in the United States base at Chaguaramas.” Still, it urged discretion. While the Foreign Office could not dismiss fears of radiation with any certainty, it conveyed to Washington that “every effort was being made to ensure secrecy for fear of alarming the local populations.”¹⁷

Three days later, a telegram from the secretary of state for the colonies to the colonial governor of Trinidad, Edward Beetham, echoed Washington with assurances that no nuclear submarines were based at Chaguaramas. More to the point, it insisted that any radiation present at Chaguaramas was confined to “standard types of domestic or hospital equipment.”¹⁸

15 Selwyn D. Ryan, *Eric Williams: The Myth and the Man* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2009), 186, 189.

16 C. L. R. James, “Independence, Energy and Creative Talent of Carnival Can Do Other Wonders,” *The Nation*, 21 February 1959.

17 Foreign Office to Washington, 10 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

18 Sir Edward Beetham to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 13 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

The reluctant admission by the Americans to the British did nothing to calm public feeling in Trinidad. On 16 June, Beetham warned London of the “increasing restlessness” of a “West Indian population . . . determined to have independence [that] will not tolerate circumscription of that independence by a cession of its lands by the U.K. eighteen years ago.”¹⁹ Beetham, the Oxford-educated colonial administrator who previously served Her Majesty’s Government in Swaziland and the Windward Islands, could only prostrate before a people with their hearts set collectively on independence from Britain. Ever their loyal servant, Beetham insisted that any future agreement on Chaguaramas must be “freely reached with the West Indian representatives . . . with Trinidad and Tobago the number one victim of the past, speaking with its own voice, in its own right, in its own cause.”²⁰

Indeed, Williams and his ministers were kept in the dark as Trinidad found itself embroiled in the nuclear security operations of the Cold War. Even as the tracking station at Chaguaramas promised to assuage fears over nuclear warfare and fallout, it treaded unceremoniously into a crucible of anticolonial fervor. For the moment, the Trinidad government mirrored the mood of the masses. Government officials indulged in rumors as well. On the evening of 16 June, Williams’s ministers convened a special meeting to discuss the radiation issue. Here, they shared evidence that contradicted the Americans. The first, extracted from leaked minutes of a secret meeting held by US officials on 4 May, indicated that “the Air Force is commencing to radiate and have a security force.” The second, more cryptic yet potentially more damning, relayed fragments of a conversation between Philip C. Habib—then US consul general in Trinidad—and Rear Admiral Edward Stephen, US Navy commander of the South Atlantic Station. The extracts from the conversation read as follows: “This thing is really going against us. . . . They now have us on the fall out. . . . Proof of risk to lives in the West Indies. . . . What are Castro’s reactions. . . . Fighting a rearguard action.”²¹ This string of fragments and non sequiturs, perhaps innocent in isolation, took on new meaning against a backdrop of American secrecy and espionage in a region electrified by the recent seizure of power by Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement in Cuba.

Radiation soon suffused the diplomatic triangle of Port of Spain, London, and Washington. On 27 June, Undersecretary of State for the Colonies Julian Amery arrived in Trinidad to discuss the transfer of police command from the British colonial governor to the local premier. Even as Amery prepared to discuss this unrelated matter with Williams and his ministers, colonial attachés worried that the radiation issue had generated “very intense suspicion toward the U.S.A. and . . . doubts as to whether [Her Majesty’s Government] would stand up to them” which, in turn, “made [the Trinidad government] even more touchy over the Police question.”²² All matters were now secondary to radiation. When Amery landed in Trinidad, he made the

19 Sir Edward Beetham to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

20 Beetham to Secretary of State, 16 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

21 “Note of a Meeting about Radiation from Chaguaramas,” 16 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

22 “SECRET: Alleged Radiation from the American Base at Chaguaramas in Trinidad,” 26 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

unforced blunder of meeting with the heads of the police force before convening with Williams. Williams later recounted that “Amery was as rude as possible” and charged him with “using the constitution reform issue as blackmail on the Chaguaramas issue, where we had recently been led to suspect that radiation was involved.”²³

The public shared his assessment. James reported on rumors that Amery’s visit had coincided with that of an unnamed American admiral who would join the undersecretary and Williams in talks to resolve the matter of the US base. The American consul general rubbished reports that a US Navy admiral had ever touched down in Trinidad. Yet the release of a public denial only fueled rumors anew. James regarded reports of the “vanishing admiral” as credible. Yet he insisted that this remained secondary to “the rumour itself and what took place as a result.”²⁴ For James, this demonstrated the power of the West Indian people to raise a petty rumor to the level of a *political fact*. The public believed that the British and Americans colluded to settle the matter of Chaguaramas behind closed doors. This political fact frustrated Amery’s efforts to negotiate a swift resolution to the police question; it compelled a public denial from the Americans. Through his platform with *The Nation*, James let the people know what they had achieved.

These are political facts. They have nothing whatever to do with whether the Admiral came or not. In the early days of the 1914 War, there were not only rumours but people were prepared to swear that they had seen Russian detachments travelling through England on the way to the hard-pressed front in France. These hallucinations were a political fact. They testified to the terribly urgent feeling that Russia’s millions were needed to stop the German steamroller. The American State Department has made blunder after blunder in its handling of the Chaguaramas matter. The greatest blunder of all would be to ignore once more what has happened under their very eyes or the eyes of their observers.²⁵

Radiation unleashed a terribly urgent feeling that the return of Chaguaramas was tantamount to independence. If Chaguaramas had previously been a matter of importance to the West Indian premiers, ministers, and party bureaucrats looking for a suitable federal capital, it now constituted a matter of concern to the nation as a whole. The rumor was political fact.

Catching Power

In Trinidad, the rumors of working people erupted as a topic of diplomatic consequence. The Foreign Office, frustrated by its exclusion from plans for an installation at Chaguaramas, relished an opportunity to scold the Americans. Where the Americans prioritized secrecy in their BMEWS scheme, British officials were glib in their assertion that in “the United Kingdom it has been our practice, in order to satisfy public anxiety . . . to make a public statement explaining, so far as security requirements permit, the nature of the installation and its danger

²³ Eric Eustace Williams, *Inward Hunger: The Education of a Prime Minister* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), 170.

²⁴ C. L. R. James, “Looking Back at the Crisis: 2: The Strange Case of the Vanishing Admiral,” *The Nation*, 24 July 1959.

²⁵ James, “Looking Back at the Crisis: 2.”

if any.”²⁶ As a withering British Empire lectured Washington on the proper handling of colonial possessions and outposts, the moment to intervene with a public declaration had already passed. When the Americans proposed to publicly unveil the tracking station as “one of the most modern and powerful in the world,” Governor Beetham recoiled at the thought of rumors swirling anew over the radiant power of the base and its hazardous effects.²⁷

As the party and the people aligned in their desires for independence in Trinidad, they lamented their ignorance of US affairs within Trinidad’s borders. In a 3 July address to the open-air University of Woodford Square in downtown Port of Spain, Williams fanned the flames of anticolonial agitation by equating the return of Chaguaramas with the defense of national sovereignty: “All laws violated. Immigration laws. People come back and forth. There are boats that discharge at Chaguaramas and those boats let off their crew at Chaguaramas and the crew travels overland in Trinidad territory. . . . No record of the people who come in, no question of immigration control, health control, quarantine, currency, no question of fire-arms—does that strike a chord (Applause)?”²⁸ Williams chose to frame the American base as a security threat. Undocumented migration and smuggling infringed on the sovereignty of a West Indies Federation. But the applause he received was not fueled by xenophobia. Rather, it was the problem of secrecy itself that roused the audience. Williams disclosed that the plans for a tracking station had never crossed his desk. His accusation of illicit business and secret installations by the US military was contentious enough. But his address resounded when he dared to make rumor into a public declaration:

The information reached me about three weeks ago . . . to the effect that approximately two months ago the American authorities began radiation at Chaguaramas. We don’t know much as a Government, with the possible exception of the Doctors, Drs. Mahabir and Solomon, about radiation. We don’t know much about the dangers, I don’t believe much is known about the dangers anywhere. They are now being investigated, they are now being studied, there is evidence to suggest that there is some danger to the population, but the important thing is we don’t know, I can’t tell you what is involved, and I doubt that any member of the Government could really tell you. All that I could tell you is that I have heard that it involves some sort of ray operating in a radius of about five or seven miles.²⁹

In a single flourish, the leak-turned-rumor now represented the official word of Williams and his government. When the Americans tried and failed to shroud their operations behind the porous gates of the base, Williams deployed the rumors of radiant power to activate the power of the entire population.

His gambit worked. He reprised this performance two weeks later as the theater of anticolonial anticipation shifted east to Arima. Unlike the masses who gathered at Woodford Square in the capital, the residents of Arima and the east Trinidad municipalities of Sangre

26 Foreign Office to Washington, 18 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

27 Secretary of State for the Colonies to Colonial Attache, Washington, 16 June 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

28 “Chaguaramas: Documentation 3,” *The Nation*, 24 July 1959.

29 “Premier Speaks to the People: University of Woodford Square, July 3, 1959,” *The Nation*, 8 July 1959.

Grande, Toco, and Manzanilla were further removed from the drama unfolding at the US Navy base. The people of Arima rested safely beyond the five-to-seven-mile radius that Williams invoked in Port of Spain. But in what is now regarded as one of his finest speeches, “From Slavery to Chaguaramas,” Williams equated the realization of independence with the return of Chaguaramas. He denounced the practice of smuggling again, but his speech crescendoed on the question of radiation: “We find that this tracking station has no agreement to support it at all. *And then you find out that radiation is going on down there, and we want to know what else is going on, you wouldn’t know.*”³⁰

On 19 July, Williams took his show on the road again. After Arima, he set his sights on Point Fortin and the Southwest Peninsula. Here, in the agricultural lands and oilfields of “deep south,” he faced the greatest test of his sermon on Chaguaramas. In truth, the struggle for Chaguaramas arrived in Point Fortin well before Williams. The people outpaced the premier. On the outskirts of town, Williams met a large bicycle procession that escorted him along the final stretch into Point Fortin. For nearly a mile, telephone poles were adorned with branches of balisier flowers, the emblem of the PNM. Above the Southern Main Road, residents hung a large banner that read, “CHAG FOR FED CAPITAL NOW,” above the government entourage.³¹ By the time Williams entered the packed hall on a rain-drenched evening, the masses of south Trinidad had beaten him to the punch. Thoughts of independence for the West Indies filled their minds and Chaguaramas was the immediate task at hand.

Later, in *The Nation*, James wrote in the collective voice of the people of Point Fortin and approximated their perspective as follows: “We are at the opposite end of the island. We are not at Chaguaramas. We do not hear the speeches in the University [of Woodford Square]. But . . . we choose for our welcoming slogan a slogan on Chaguaramas.”³² Opposition politicians including Bhadese Maraj and Albert Gomes chided Williams for lending credence to disputed reports of radiation hazards. Gomes, especially, portrayed Williams as a demagogue who stood alone in his “frenetic zeal” on the Chaguaramas question and recklessly indulged in petty rumor.³³ In his entries for *The Nation*, James rose to the defense of Williams and the PNM. James shot back at Gomes: How could Williams be isolated on the Chaguaramas issue when the people gathered in crowds of more than ten thousand to receive, listen, and applaud what they wanted expressed? Gomes could not imagine the people of Trinidad as legitimate political actors in their own right. If Gomes understood Williams to be isolated from the elite political class in Trinidad on this issue, James countered that the power to secure independence rested not with the government but in the popular will of West Indian people. Power rested not in the Federal Parliament of the West Indies Federation but in the streets of

30 Eric E. Williams, *From Slavery to Chaguaramas: A Speech Delivered on July 17, 1959, at Arima, Trinidad* (Port-of-Spain: PNM, 1959), 19 (italics mine); see ericwilliams.gov.tt/from-slavery-to-chaguaramas-a-speech-delivered-by-the-premier-dr-eric-williams-at-arima-trinidad-july-17th-1959.

31 C. L. R. James, “Looking Back at the Crisis—5: The Enemy within the Gates: The Treacheries and Betrayals of the *Guardian* and the *Chronicle*,” *The Nation*, 14 August 1959.

32 James, “Looking Back at the Crisis—5.”

33 Albert Gomes, quoted in James, “Looking Back at the Crisis—5.”

Port of Spain, Arima, Point Fortin, and over the hills and valleys of the entire West Indies. In Point Fortin, the nation outpaced the government. For James, the responsibility of the mass party was to maintain the pace that the people had set.

Chaguaramas and the Question of Power

In *The Nation*, James took great care not to confirm the presence of a public hazard at Chaguaramas. Previously, in 1958, James had invoked the specter of radiation in the slim book *Facing Reality*. Issuing a caution at the beginning of the nuclear age, he and his collaborators observed, “In England recently radiation escaped from an atomic pile and infected the countryside, and milk from cows became radioactive.”³⁴ When commenting on the question of radiation in Trinidad, however, he maintained that he held “no knowledge whatever of the scientific aspects of radiation.”³⁵ Instead, he limited himself to his expertise as a historian of world revolution. From this vantage, the truth of the radiation threat was a moot question. The rumors of radiation rose to the level of political facts deserving of serious inquiry rather than smug dismissal.³⁶

As he concluded in his report, “When the question of radiation was made known, this meant that the whole question of what [the Americans] were doing at Chaguaramas was now placed on the agenda.” Radiation and its potential effects on the bodies of ordinary people had shifted the location of the Chaguaramas debate from the closed negotiations between American, British, and Trinidadian politicians to the streets occupied by ordinary West Indians. Chaguaramas had become a national issue of consequence. James put it bluntly: “For [the Americans] to believe that they could have rushed in here secretly and get a Premier to huddle with them in some secret conclave, shows how much they still misunderstand who and what they are dealing with.”³⁷ Regardless of whether the US base emitted hazardous levels of radiation, the political fact of radiation had been unleashed by the same energy that fueled the Carnival road march several months prior. James understood that this was not the work of his masterful intellect or that of his protégé-turned-premier, Williams. Rather, the people had “dragged [the Chaguaramas question] from semi-obscurity right into the light of day.”³⁸ The Americans could not simply answer to the premier and the Legislative Council. They would have to answer to the people of the West Indies themselves.

For a moment, at least, the PNM embraced James’s model for a mass party. It kept “no secret from the public.”³⁹ It listened to and echoed the intuition of the masses. Their intuition on the question of radiant power prompted the West Indian people to recognize their power

34 C. L. R. James, Grace C. Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality: The New Society and How to Bring It Closer* (Detroit: Bewick, 1974), 46. See also Christian Høgsbjerg, “‘The Very Valley of the Shadow of Death’: C. L. R. James on Capitalism and Environmental Destruction,” *Radical History Review* 145 (2023): 62–83.

35 James, “Notes on the Evans Report,” *The Nation*, 22 January 1960.

36 James, “Looking Back at the Crisis: 2.”

37 James, “Looking Back at the Crisis: 2.”

38 C. L. R. James, “The Americans and the Crisis: Fourth in the Series, Looking Back at the Crisis,” *The Nation*, 7 August 1959.

39 James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, 59.

in politics. In mere weeks, the Chaguaramas question exploded from a rumor to a matter of regional consequence. While opposition politicians such as Maraj and Gomes sought to keep the people ignorant of the affairs and negotiations between colonial powers and the local government, Williams and the PNM traveled from town to town to observe where the people of Trinidad had reached.

In his observations on the radiation issue, James clarified the terms of his perspective on working-class self-organization. Foreshadowing his later observations on the question of power, James reasoned,

A constitution is more than what is written on paper. A constitution is the effect of what is written on paper on the various political and social relations in a state. And if the people of Trinidad and the ruling party of Trinidad and the Government of Trinidad decide that the consequences of the 1941 [destroyers-for-bases] treaty are intolerable and they will do all they can to put an end to them, the American Government is making a grave mistake if it believes that it can depend on the British Government to impose the American will upon the people of this country.⁴⁰

James was forthright. Independence would not be won with the lowering of the Union Jack or the departure of the Americans. In their determination on Chaguaramas, the people of Trinidad demonstrated the substance of independence for the first time. The effect of what was “written on paper” was not a nominal transfer of power—and control over the police and treasury—from foreign to local hands. Rather, with independence not yet won on paper, its effects were palpable in the social motion on display in the farthest reaches of Trinidad.

The colonial newspapers of record, the *Trinidad Chronicle* and *Trinidad Guardian*, accused James of stoking rumors of American deception. James, though, only dared to put in print what the public wanted expressed. The public already believed that the Americans had deceived them. Where his editorial counterparts at the *Chronicle* and *Guardian* understood their journalistic duty to defend the official declarations handed down from Washington and London, James inverted this charge as the editor of *The Nation*. If what the Americans said and what the people believed were at odds, James cast his lot with the latter. The undetermined scientific fact of radiant power remained secondary to the political fact of working-class power that rumors of radiation ignited in the streets of Trinidad and Tobago. In a revolutionary moment, the party newspaper could not maintain objectivity on the matter of radiation. James made it plain: “What the people believe about Chaguaramas [was] second in importance to no other factor in the situation.”⁴¹

Modern “Science”

As James predicted, the energy, creativity, and capacity for independent organization put on display each year during Carnival had been transferred to another object. In their gatherings

40 James, “The Americans and the Crisis.”

41 James, “Looking Back at the Crisis—5.”

and processions along the streets of Port of Spain, Arima, and Point Fortin, the people of Trinidad played another masquerade. In their determination on the radiation issue, the question of Chaguaramas came to stand in for the cause of independence at large. The banners, decorations, pelotons, and mass assemblies compelled a rumor to be taken seriously as a political fact. Whether or not the radiant power of the tracking station could be documented, its effects could be readily observed. James opined again: “I say that the people of Trinidad believe that the Americans are taking out their radiation equipment and when the expert leaves they will return it. *That is a political fact and all who are concerned with this question had better make that political fact an integral part of their calculations.*”⁴²

James carried his discussion of invisible forms of energy a step further. Separate from his special features on Chaguaramas, James maintained his weekly column in *The Nation*, “Without Malice.” On 25 September, he reserved the column for a special consideration of obeah. Often euphemized as “science,” obeah encompasses repertoires of ritual healing and harm that are criminalized and derided as the province of the occult. For obeah practitioners and adherents of Trinidadian worship traditions of Orisha and Spiritual Baptism, “catching power” describes the process of possession by an ancestor or spirit.⁴³

James maintained a distant fascination with this science in his earliest works of fiction, such as the 1927 short story “La Divina Pastora” and his 1936 novel, *Minty Alley*. Yet the radiation scare prompted a newfound appreciation for the peculiar intuition and powers of obeah. In a peculiar departure from his usual offerings in the weekly column “Without Malice,” James traded in his distant fascination with obeah for a celebration of its untold wonders: “If a child is in terrible danger, it sends out what may be called rays or waves which can be received by a person who is closely attuned. . . . I believe that we in the West Indies should examine more carefully many of the tales and events which we heard as young people and which we were inclined to dismiss as the foolishness of the old folks. Modern science is on their side.”⁴⁴ “Modern science” playfully implicated the British experts tasked with the measurement of radiation at the American base and Caribbean practitioners of obeah known as “scientists.”⁴⁵ James made clear, though, that the latter possesses far greater powers in the arena of political fact. The people of Trinidad were catching the power of independence. Possessed by this collective spirit, they took matters into their own hands. Even if the forces that sparked the

42 James, “Looking Back at the Crisis—5” (italics in original).

43 On the concept of “catching power” in Trinidad, see J. Brent Crosson, “Catching Power: Problems with Possession, Sovereignty, and African Religions in Trinidad,” *Ethnos* 84, no. 4 (2019): 588–614.

44 C. L. R. James, “Without Malice,” *The Nation*, 25 September 1959.

45 As Stephan Palmié observes, “Today, *science* ironically forms a synonym for *obeah*, a term that enters the English language in the context of the first antiwitchcraft laws passed in the British colonial empire in the aftermath of the 1760 Jamaican slave rebellion.” Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 28. For more on this semantic slippage between these two practices of science, see Palmié, *Thinking with Ngangas: What Afro-Cuban Ritual Can Teach Us about Scientific Practice and Vice Versa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); and J. Brent Crosson, *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

anticolonial movement were invisible, their effects were palpable among those possessed to gather by the thousands at rallies across Trinidad.

Even as the report on radiation at Chaguaramas recorded its calculations in the terms of field instruments and scientific thresholds, this could not alter the political fact that radiation had set upon the West Indies. The facts and figures produced by experts could not reverse the struggle for Chaguaramas. Once these other powers had taken hold, a formal inquiry could hardly diffuse their effects. James concluded accordingly, “Chaguaramas is now the symbol of freedom to a people determined to be free. That is what the crisis has done.”⁴⁶

James refused to confine the question of power to matters of work or domination. His renewed appreciation for obeah and the “foolishness of old folks” cast doubt on whether the scientific authorities in Her Majesty’s Government could resolve the matter of radiation. Instead, it prompted a return to notions of energy and power that predated their appropriation by thermodynamics. Indeed, energy was once charged with affective dimensions in which moral and “spiritual meanings were mingled with the letter and interpretation of physical concepts.”⁴⁷ James understood this clearly from his upbringing on the oil-rich island of Trinidad. In the first decade after his birth, the transition to a petroleum economy did not fully displace the plantation economy of old. Neither did it displace folk repertoires of energy as an invisible, otherworldly force that exerts itself on an individual and collective will. In the nuclear age, radiation prompted him to consider how power might take the form of invisible forces. Indeed, nuclear power does not simply generate invisible radiant energy; it is premised on the *production* of invisibility that obscures the material presence “of worker exposures, of occupational diseases, of the true collective dose generated by nuclear power plants.”⁴⁸ By daring to make this invisible force visible, the masses unleashed this energetic force on the streets of Trinidad. Invisible forces compelled them to move. While James had dismissed the tales of his youth during his British colonial education, he now returned to them anew.

The Evans Report

The formal inquiry began when the UK-appointed independent expert, D. R. Evans, arrived in Trinidad on 24 August 1959. In the weeks prior, British officials cautioned against any extramural activity that would signal bias toward the Americans.⁴⁹ Moreover, even as their public statements reduced the issue to the presence or absence of dangerous quantities of radiation, classified communiqués reveal Downing Street’s understanding that the issue had eclipsed that of radiation. British officials erred, however, in their belief that the ill will toward

46 James, “The Americans and the Crisis.”

47 Cara New Daggett, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 19.

48 Gabrielle Hecht, “Invisible Production and the Production of Invisibility: Cleaning, Maintenance, and Mining in the Industrial Sector,” in D. Kleinman and K. Moore, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Science, Technology and Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 359.

49 Governor-General’s Office, Trinidad to P. Rogers, Esq., 13 July 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

the Americans was felt by Williams alone. As they prepared to brief Evans a month prior to his investigation at Chaguaramas, the British confirmed feelings of “resentment” toward the American military base among a contingent of Trinidad ministers. But they reserved their strongest words for Williams: “The Premier in particular feels strongly and almost obsessively that [the base] was inflicted upon Trinidad without their consent.”⁵⁰ Blinded by its suspicion of Williams—the man and the premier—British intelligence could not comprehend that power now rested with the people rather than the party vanguard. Evans’s burden of proof was not to the Trinidad ministers or premier but to the masses who had conjured the political fact of radiation from its energetic waves.

On 1 September, Evans returned to Britain. Two weeks later, he submitted his report to British authorities. Prior to making its findings public, the Colonial Office sent an advance copy of the report to Washington to ensure that its contents posed no threat to US security interests.⁵¹ Once again, the British requested discretion to prevent any evidence of collusion from reaching the desks of the Trinidad government. The Evans Report maintained a detached, scientific register in its assessment of the hazards posed by the US base at Chaguaramas. It rubbished reports of the removal of equipment by the Americans, confirming that this was limited to the routine transport and maintenance of damaged transmitting valves. On the more pertinent question of radiation, Evans was firm: “No radiation hazard exists to the population of Trinidad.” Evans did not suggest, however, that no radiation was present. Instead, he maintained that the radiation at Chaguaramas was nonnuclear microwave radiation such as that commonly associated with radio and radar transmission. He issued a final rebuke to the Trinidadian public: “This equipment can contribute to no hazard to personnel outside the confines of the missile tracking station.”⁵²

Evans’s science was no match for the science of the West Indian people. In his “Notes on the Evans Report” for *The Nation*, James countered the report with skepticism toward the methods employed in the British audit of the American military installation. James accepted Evans’s calculations. But he objected to the conclusions derived from them. James questioned the standard by which hazardous levels of radiation are determined. Rather than obeah, it was Western science that appeared beset by occult forces and superstition. Mere weeks after his fifty-ninth birthday, a seasoned James regarded the nuclear age as a moment in which the basic assumptions that governed modern science were unsettled by the uncertainty of an atomic future: “This ‘threshold’ is a notorious bone of contention. Governments, especially those making nuclear weapons, have insisted that they can calculate the danger point and are taking all reasonable precautions. That position has been attacked and denounced by some of the most competent scientists in the world.” James referred readers of *The Nation* to extracts

50 Secret from W. G. Downey, Ministry of Supply, 10 July 1959, CO 1031/2068, NA.

51 Colin A. Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 126.

52 “The Evans Report: Section Dealing with Radiation Hazards,” *The Nation*, 22 January 1960.

from Jack Schubert and Ralph Lapp's *Radiation: What It Is and How It Affects You*, which the newspaper excerpted in previous issues. To support his challenge to Evans, he recalled the authors' observation on the concept of the threshold: "If readers have been following the extracts . . . they will remember that the main burden of [Schubert and Lapp's] argument is: *the limit below which there is safety is consistently reduced and there is as yet no agreement on what it is.*"⁵³ The nuclear age rearranged the presumed relationship between scientific fact and fiction—knowns and unknowns. In the eyes of the public, Evans's assessment of the nonnuclear character of the radiation at Chaguaramas did not provide any certainty as to its present or future effects.

But in a sea of uncertainty, one fact remained certain for James. Even if the Evans Report could be taken at face value, the Americans had kept the ballistic missile tracking station a secret from officials in London and Port of Spain. The fact of its existence only came to light through the energy and self-organization of the Trinidadian people. Even if the threshold of dangerous radiation remained arbitrary, the truth it had exposed was not. James set the record straight: "If even the committee reports that there is no hazard, it is by accident and rumours that we knew there was the possibility of any hazard at all."⁵⁴ The people had outpaced the Crown, the PNM, and even James himself. This political fact was certain.

This ordinary wisdom had carried an entire region toward independence. But it did not draw its power from observable phenomena or measurable thresholds. It represented a collective wisdom borne out of an intimate acquaintance with the British Empire and US occupation. James, the child of empire, knew this well. Drawing from this same education, James concluded that the Colonial Office could not understand this wisdom: "Three hundred years of imperialism have left a thick crust through which light penetrates only in faint gleams and fitfully. It is to be hoped that the Americans (and the Federal Government) do not believe that the Evans Report (even if ultimately accepted to the degree that that is possible) [closes] the question. It does exactly the opposite. It opens it up, in all its wide and complicated ramifications, those known, those suspected, and those unsuspected."⁵⁵ The question of power, bound but never extinguished by four hundred years of plantation bondage and colonial rule, had been cast open again.

From Chaguaramas to Slavery

Power soon descended on the streets of Trinidad again. On the rain-drenched morning in April 1960, a crowd of more than sixty thousand gathered to fête independence for the West Indies. Nearly three years earlier, at the Second Annual Convention of the PNM, Williams had declared this date, 22 April 1960, as West Indian Independence Day. As the premier assumed

53 C. L. R. James, "Notes on the Evans Report," *The Nation*, 22 January 1960 (italics mine).

54 James, "Notes on the Evans Report."

55 James, "Notes on the Evans Report."

his familiar perch to address the popular open-air forum known as the University of Woodford Square, he shared his regrets that de jure independence had not yet been won. Instead, the flags of Trinidad and Tobago and the West Indies Federation were raised defiantly above the mass assembly.⁵⁶ Williams understood this as more than a symbolic gesture. The flying of the federation flag represented a call to power as the masses prepared to march on Chaguaramas. “We march,” Williams stressed, “to show and tell the world that if we are not yet independent in law, we today and after today are independent in fact.”⁵⁷

Williams’s distinction between law and fact borrowed heavily from the words of his teacher-turned-deputy, James. The political fact of radiation had matured. In his speech, Williams did not mention radiation or the missile tracking station. Instead, the fact of the US occupation was enough to light the fire of the mass movement. Williams’s fiery tenor extended to a stage performance in which he condemned “seven deadly sins” of colonialism to literal flames. Among the seven items ceremonially tossed to the flames was a copy of the UK-US Chaguaramas Agreement of 1941. As it burned, Williams mustered a final rhetorical blow: “We consign it to the flames . . . to hell with it.”⁵⁸

The power of sixty thousand Trinidadians marching on the US Navy base compelled the British and the Americans to bargain with Williams and the PNM. Over a series of three conferences held in London and Tobago, they would come to a resolution of the Chaguaramas question. But if Williams stressed the necessity of the immediate and unequivocal return of Chaguaramas as a “spiritual purification” for the people of the West Indies, he adopted another tack in London.⁵⁹ In an about-face from his fiery address in Woodford Square, he demanded instead that the Americans compensate his government directly for their continued use of the naval base.

The terms of the revised agreement were settled at the later summit in Crown Point, Tobago, and ratified in Port of Spain in February 1961.⁶⁰ The Americans pledged to return upward of twenty-one thousand acres of unused land at Chaguaramas to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Lands in Teteron Bay were allocated to the Trinbagonian and West Indies federal governments to house naval barracks and host joint training exercises. The United States agreed to provide US\$30 million in compensation over a period of five years. Williams boasted of his success at the Tobago conference to secure economic concessions from the Americans, including assistance for four major projects—improvements to the road to Chaguaramas, the port, the railway, and the university campus at St. Augustine.⁶¹ The terms of the agreement would be reviewed in 1967 and 1973. If the parties failed to come to

56 Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 76.

57 Eric Eustace Williams, “We Are Independent,” in P. Sutton, ed., *Forged from the Love of Liberty: Selected Speeches of Dr. Eric Williams* (Trinidad: Longman Caribbean, 1981), 314.

58 Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 77.

59 Williams, “We Are Independent,” 315.

60 Lloyd Best, “From Chaguaramas to Slavery,” *New World Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1965), newworldjournal.org/volumes/volume-ii-no-1/polemich-chaguaramas-to-slavery.

61 Williams, *Inward Hunger*, 239.

a new agreement by the end of 1973, the Americans would be granted four years to vacate the base in full.⁶²

In the deal struck with the Americans, Williams betrayed the party base that marched on Chaguaramas several months prior. Chaguaramas would remain in American hands. Williams traded true independence for a compromise brokered with Washington behind closed doors in Tobago. Not only did this contradict his earlier position on the national security threat posed by the US occupation, but his conciliatory posture shocked the Americans who had taken his fiery anticolonial speech at face value. Before the Tobago summit, US Navy officers characterized Williams as “anti-US” and expressed pessimism “that any negotiations to which he is a party could produce any agreement satisfactory to both sides.”⁶³

Williams’s deceit on Chaguaramas was not lost on James. In the hiatus between the London and Tobago negotiations, James issued his resignation from his post as editor of *The Nation*. James took issue with the party’s indifference toward the newspaper. His proposals to increase the circulation and frequency of the weekly organ and establish an independent printing press went unheard. The party leadership could only see the newspaper as an accessory of its government, so it balked at what it considered to be an unprofitable commercial venture. In March 1960, James wrote Williams privately to request that he be relieved of his post as editor of *The Nation*. He issued a final resignation letter on 14 July but continued to write regularly for the newspaper and publish his weekly column until September.⁶⁴

James’s departure unveiled fundamental differences that extended beyond management of *The Nation*. His decisive break with Williams concerned the party form itself. Prior to his resignation, Williams informed James of the party leadership’s intent to divest of *The Nation*, encouraging James instead to raise money to fund its operations privately. In James’s view, without *The Nation* the PNM ceased to function as a mass party. In his final letter to “Bill,” as he often called Williams, James declared the reason for his resignation to be “fundamentally . . . political.”⁶⁵ James resigned before the formalization of the new agreement with the Americans. Williams began to keep the veteran Marxist at a distance; his neglect of *The Nation* was case in point. James understood this not simply as a fraternal dispute but as a more fatal disagreement. In his neglect of *The Nation*, Williams had neglected the nation as well.

Their incompatible visions for the party rested upon their divergent perspectives on the question of power. Williams seized upon the power that the radiation issue had set upon the streets of Trinidad. During Williams’s nationwide tour, the people of Trinidad tilted the scales of power in his favor. The political fact of radiation earned Williams an audience with the Americans. Afterward, he was quick to disavow the power of the West Indian people that had secured his place at the negotiating table. For Williams, the indignity of the tracking station

62 Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 131.

63 US Department of the Navy, “Strategic Appraisal of Trinidad, B.W.I., October 19, 1960,” cited in Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 131.

64 James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, 103.

65 James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, 98, 104.

was that he, the premier, was not privy to its construction. Whether the people were informed of the tracking station and its potential hazards did not trouble him. Yet it was the people, not Williams, who exposed the tracking station in the first instance.

Williams did not consult the University of Woodford Square during his negotiations on Chaguaramas. On 22 December 1960, he returned to Woodford Square only to convey the terms of the handshake agreement with the Americans.⁶⁶ This time, he refrained from any talk of seven deadly sins and spiritual purification. The Trinidadian economist Lloyd Best described this scene as one of “profound psychological shock,” in which the heroic premier emerged from his populist masquerade as the champion of a “new local ruling oligarchy” tasked with preserving imperial power in the West Indies. After the spontaneous energy of the radiation issue had elevated Williams in power, the dialectic between the party and the people ceased.⁶⁷ The people of Trinidad and Tobago made a fatal error of their own by placing their faith in the premier. James made this same error of judgment. Where James understood the power of the West Indian people as a political fact that the party must make an integral part of its calculations, Williams understood this power as a temporary costume to wear in service of his own masquerade of power.⁶⁸

As a historian, Williams continued this masquerade through glaring narrative omissions that severed his government from the energy that set it into motion. Where he invoked radiation to fuel his own ascent to power, he made scarce mention of radiation in his retrospective on the Chaguaramas question.⁶⁹ But this did not alter the fact that rumors of radiation transformed an esoteric matter of the federal capital into the drama of a whole region. James cautioned Williams not to forget what the power of radiation wrought. In desperation, James submitted a memo titled “The Nation and the Party” to Williams in April 1960. He rehearsed his earlier reflections on the radiation crisis in a philosophical aside: “Behind the constitutional power is the mass movement. . . . This is the real source of power.”⁷⁰ Williams, who did not hear, would later feel.

The West Indies Federation, once destined to occupy a federal capital at Chaguaramas, collapsed in 1962. A 1961 referendum in Jamaica, in which the federal question was defeated, set its disintegration into motion. In response, Williams declared, “One from ten leaves nought,” shooting down any revised federal compact.⁷¹ A short-lived proposal for a unitary Eastern Caribbean state failed as well.⁷² On 31 August 1962, the red, white, and black replaced the Union Jack and, with it, Trinidad and Tobago gained independence in law but not in fact.

66 Best, “From Chaguaramas to Slavery.”

67 For more on the concept of the “state masquerade” as a masquerade of power, see Ryan Cecil Jobson, *The Petro-State Masquerade: Oil, Sovereignty, and Power in Trinidad and Tobago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).

68 Jobson, *The Petro-State Masquerade*.

69 See Williams, *Inward Hunger*.

70 James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, 51.

71 Eric Eustace Williams, cited in Palmer, *Eric Williams*, 179.

72 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 130.

James would revisit matters of power on many occasions in the decades to come. In political addresses, he spoke often on the “Transfer of Power” or the “Seizure of Power.”⁷³ In 1981, he refashioned his musings on power in a eulogy for Walter Rodney titled “Walter Rodney and the Question of Power.” He lamented Rodney’s fatal error that led to his assassination by a deputy of the Forbes Burnham regime in Guyana: “That tremendous upheaval of the population . . . this is what you have to depend on, and Walter did not wait for that. He tried to force it.” James understood these upheavals to be spontaneous events. This did not mean they were lacking in political wisdom. But they were often driven by incalculable forces. As he concluded in his tribute to Rodney, “These are upheavals like earthquakes. The revolution, the upheaval of the masses of the population, is a tremendous event that people cannot control.”⁷⁴

James’s insights on the question of power could be traced to his careful study of revolutions in Russia (*World Revolution, 1917–1936*) and Haiti (*The Black Jacobins*).⁷⁵ But his return to Trinidad prompted another lesson in power. In Trinidad, rumor manifested as political fact. This fact was not something Williams or James could control. Much like the rumors of bread rationing in Petrograd or the lwa at Bois Caïman, an unseen force sparked a tremendous upheaval. James watched as the political fact of radiant power sparked the insurgent power of the masses in action.

When James penned his manifesto on the PNM and the crisis that befell it, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, he testified to this again: “People of the West Indies, you do not know your own power.”⁷⁶ The struggle for Chaguaramas had confirmed this. He reserved the dedication page for the people whose determination had radiated throughout the entire Caribbean:

West Indian people have already made an imperishable claim to nationhood. Despite the fact that the American base at Chaguaramas had brought more money here than had ever been brought before, when called upon, you answered, and made it clear that, with only a few years partial freedom behind you, you were ready to throw down the gauntlet to the most powerful nation in the world, to assert your rights as a people, to say that Chaguaramas was yours and you were not going to be deprived of it. In all my thirty years of political struggle against imperialism, I know nothing finer. That, for the time being, has gone down the drain, but the action itself was a sign that, despite the years of suppression, you were ready to take your place in line with the best of our time.

Comrades-in-arms, I salute you.⁷⁷

73 See C. L. R. James, “The Seizure of Power” (1975), box 11, folder 4, C. L. R. James Papers, Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library; and C. L. R. James, “Memorial Address for Uriah Butler” (1978), box 2, folder 4, Oilfields Workers Trade Union Library, San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago.

74 C. L. R. James, “Walter Rodney and the Question of Power,” 30 January 1981, www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1981/01/rodney.htm.

75 See C. L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917–1936* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); and James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963).

76 James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, 4.

77 James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, 1.