

*Chris Moffat (History, Queen Mary University of London)
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Against ‘Cultures of Hiatus’: History and the Archive in the Political Thought of John La Rose

“A message of hope and contradiction but such is my message.”
- John La Rose¹

I. Introduction

If you walk north on Stroud Green Road from London’s Finsbury Park station, you will pass the headquarters of a successful British picture framer, a pub signaling “The World’s End,” multiple outposts of the Pak’s hair and cosmetics empire, and a line of competing butcher shops, before arriving, on your right-hand side, at a bookshop painted red. This has, since 1973, been the home of New Beacon Books, a specialist bookseller bearing the quiet distinction of being Britain’s first independent publisher of black-interest fiction and nonfiction. The front window, crowded with pamphlets and flyers, evinces the shop’s status as a

¹ From ‘Prosepoem for a Conference’ (1967), in John La Rose, *Eyelets of Truth Within Me* (London: New Beacon, 1992), 13.

community institution; the bookshelves inside bend under the weight of their allocated continents—texts arranged by geographical region. New Beacon’s publishing activities, inaugurated in 1966, have today begun to attract scholarly attention for what they reveal about the history of independent publishing in postwar Britain and the dissemination of radical black and “third world” thought in the decades after *Windrush*.² Further research into the shop and its political significance will build profitably on Brian Alleyne’s 2002 ethnography of what he calls the “New Beacon Circle”—the group of activists gathered around the bookshop, propelling its local and international campaigns³—and will draw, necessarily, on the institution signaled by a small placard over the bookshop’s entrance: the George Padmore Institute, an archive and educational resource center occupying the upper three floors of the building.

Officially founded in 1991 and opened to the public in the early 2000s, the George Padmore Institute (GPI) serves as a repository for documents related to New Beacon’s publishing and campaigning activities and as a storehouse for the personal papers of affiliates and associates of the circle. It presents itself as a research center “housing materials relating mainly to the black community of Caribbean, African and Asian descent in Britain and continental Europe.”⁴ My interest is not, however, the rich *content* of the archive but rather the form and function of the archive itself: the call to responsibility it transmits and its relation to the work and thought of the GPI’s founding force, the Trinidadian poet,

² See Ruth Bush and Jay Bernard, *Beacon of Hope: New Beacon in Poetry and Prose* (London: New Beacon, 2016); Rachael Gilmour, “‘Sight, Sound and Meaning’: Voice/Print Transitions in Black British Poetry,” in Kate McLoughlin, ed., *Flower/Power: British Literature in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and also the focus on New Beacon in *Wasafiri* 88 (2016).

³ Brian Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race: Black Activism and Cultural Politics* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

⁴ “Who We Are,” George Padmore Institute, www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/Who%20We%20Are (accessed 16 September 2016).

publisher, and activist John La Rose. What does an archive built by a poet look like? How are the demands of an archive—an institution that is traditionally meant to *freeze* time, to *stop* motion⁵—reconciled with and deployed to serve a politics invested in forward movement, further struggle? How does the GPI resist becoming—to cite a fear once expressed by La Rose—just another “dead monument”?⁶

In the GPI, La Rose and his colleagues in the New Beacon Circle offer resources to think the relationship between radical politics and the institution of the archive in new and unconventional ways. In one sense, the vision for the GPI anticipates later attempts—propelled by new digital technologies—to liberate archival memory from its “archic” root, its foundational and authoritative nature, and instead cultivate a space that facilitates a different sense of possibility.⁷ But the GPI also disrupts conventional vocabularies for understanding nonstate archives: it is not merely a “counter-archive,” in that it does not rely on an oppositional stance for its value, nor is it a straightforward “archive of vindication”—an institution designed to foster a sense of pride in a given community—precisely because it is not concerned with building monuments.⁸ The distinction of the GPI is the manner in which it works to subvert its own authority, resisting identity as a “destination” and appearing instead as a guide on a path, a provocation for new thought. The metaphor for understanding this unique function, *between* “foundation” and “movement,” is there on the

⁵ Eivind Røssak, ed., *The Archive in Motion* (Oslo: Novus, 2010).

⁶ John La Rose (JLR) to Andrew Salkey, 7 January 1977, Personal Papers of John La Rose, John La Rose Archive (hereafter LRA), 01/0698/1, George Padmore Institute (GPI), London.

⁷ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

⁸ Deborah Thomas, “Caribbean Studies, Archive Building, and the Problem of Violence,” *Small Axe*, no. 41 (July 2013): 28–42.

bookshop sign: the archive as *beacon*—as something that is stable and reliable, that may prompt a sense of hope but is successful only if it is *passed by, left behind*. The radical potential of this formulation—of the archive that *subverts itself*—is the primary focus of this essay.

I arrive at the GPI adventitiously. I am, in the first place, a historian of modern India and thus appear as parvenu within the vibrant debates constituting the history of black British political thought and an emergent Caribbean intellectual history.⁹ And yet there appear to be several points of consonance between arguments made about the search for Caribbean intellectual traditions and those informing a nascent intellectual history for India—not least the struggle with linguistic and regional divides and the difficulty in defining what, exactly, is “Caribbean” or “Indian.”¹⁰ Shruti Kapila’s exhortation to collapse the distinction between political *thinker* and *practitioner* when contemplating intellectual history outside its Eurocentric moorings seems particularly relevant when reassessing someone like John La Rose. For Kapila, figures like M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are overlooked as philosophers and thinkers precisely because of their success as political practitioners;¹¹ La Rose, similarly, is seen primarily as an able organizer and successful

⁹ See, for example, Brian Meeks and Folke Lindahl, eds., *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2001); Silvio Torres-Saillant, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006); and Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993). I am grateful to Richard Drayton for sharing materials for his King’s College London seminar “Caribbean Intellectual History.”

¹⁰ Compare the assessment in Anthony Bogues, “Writing Caribbean Intellectual History,” *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 166–78, with essays in Shruti Kapila, ed., *An Intellectual History for India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Shruti Kapila, “Global Intellectual History and the Indian Political,” in Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 253–74. See also Sunil Purushotham, “World History in the Atomic Age: Past, Present, and Future in the Political Thought of Jawaharlal Nehru,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 3 (2017): 837–67.

campaigner—a “slow builder and consolidator,” in his own words.¹² This understanding is encouraged by La Rose’s expressed desire to remain in the background, to provide support for other and especially younger artists and thinkers,¹³ and indeed La Rose would distance himself from the abstractions he thought characteristic of academic thought, emphasizing instead his ground-level experience of political struggle. This was one way that he distinguished himself from his close interlocutor C. L. R. James, whom La Rose saw as a brilliant social critic and literary figure but an unsuccessful organizer who failed to engage with popular struggles in their shared home country of Trinidad.¹⁴ But Anthony Bogues and others working in the Caribbean context have argued that we need a more expansive understanding of what constitutes thought and thus the proper objects of our investigation. The call to interrogate “sites which are not formally and conventionally considered as knowledge repositories”¹⁵—from calypso music to religious practice—will be familiar to intellectual historians working in South Asia, sensitive to the diverse contexts facilitating the enunciation of new concepts.

The distance between my work as a historian of India and the present concern with Caribbean thought is collapsed, necessarily, by the long history of Afro-Indian entanglement in La Rose’s Trinidad¹⁶—a multiethnic heritage often animated in New Beacon’s work—but also directly by my personal involvement

¹² See chapter 4 in Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*.

¹³ See the testimonies in John La Rose Tribute Committee, *Foundations of a Movement: A Tribute to John La Rose* (London: Villiers, 1991).

¹⁴ Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*, 127. See also “John La Rose Interviewed by Ron Ramdin, 1992-04-28,” British Library Sounds Archive, 81 min., catalogue.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiisirs?ps=AaEvmU7FDo/WORKS-FILE/9910010/9. Thanks to Hannah Ishmael for directing me to this resource.

¹⁵ Bogues, “Writing Caribbean Intellectual History,” 171.

¹⁶ Kevin Yelvington, ed., *Trinidad Ethnicity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

with the GPI. Though I never had the opportunity to meet La Rose, who died in 2006 at the age of seventy-eight, I have since 2012 been a volunteer at the GPI and a member of the Archive Management Board. In 2015, I was part of a committee organizing an exhibition on La Rose's life that took place at Islington Museum in London. In his address at the opening, La Rose's son Michael noted the exhibition's intention to provide not simply the story of a life but a "blue print for Collective Action."¹⁷ Rather than a biographical narrative, the collection was organized to form a manifesto for the future. This specific historicity—where the past is activated not to inspire genuflection or quiet reflection but to *incite*—informs the GPI's work more generally.

Because of this experience, I often find myself assuming the familiar "John," and in this sense I fall captive to the intimacy of the archive, a feeling many researchers will recognize. But this imagined intimacy contrasts with other work on New Beacon, primarily Alleyne's aforementioned "ethnographical-biographical account" of New Beacon's founders—John La Rose and Sarah White—and their associates, drawing on fieldwork from the 1990s. Alleyne's problem-space is one of social movements and activist praxis, and in this sense it contrasts with my own entry via the history of political thought and my particular interest in the relationship between a radical politics and the *institution* of the archive. There are two key questions I want to explore in the sections that follow. The first is the question of political hope at a time of collapse and upheaval—in the postcolonial Caribbean but also in Britain—and its place in

¹⁷ Michael La Rose, exhibition opening remarks, *Dream to Change the World: The Life and Legacy of John La Rose*, Islington Museum, London, 21 May 2015, www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/chair-gpis-opening-remarks-launch-dream-change-world-exhibition, para. 12.

John La Rose's philosophy of history. Here I will interrogate the tension between *foundation* and *movement*, arguing that what makes La Rose compelling as a political thinker is his drift between the roles of *architect*—builder and consolidator—and *poet*, concerned with experimentation and contingency. Second is the question of how the *archive* fits into this story, not simply as a “collection” but as a “generative system.”¹⁸ What, in other words, are the GPI's affordances?¹⁹ What repertoires of action does it make possible, what sort of questions is it meant to prompt? What are the implications of an archive that subverts itself?

II. La Rose and the World

John La Rose was born in Arima, Trinidad, in 1927. His entry to the world was thus contemporaneous with the transformation of anticolonial politics in the English-speaking Caribbean, the 1930s typically understood as a period of radicalization: agitations in British Honduras, riots in Guiana, strikes in Saint Kitts and St Lucia, and unrest in Barbados and Jamaica.²⁰ In Trinidad, the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union was consolidated in 1937; that year, a strike against exploitative conditions and racist discrimination in the colony's southern oilfields spiraled into widespread riots, moving to the sugar factories and fueled by the leadership of radical preacher Tubal Uriah Butler. While La Rose's class position ensured some stability in this period—his father a cocoa trader, his

¹⁸ I owe clarity in this Foucauldian injunction to David Scott, “The Archaeology of Black Memory: An Interview with Robert A Hill,” *Small Axe*, no. 5 (March 1999): 82.

¹⁹ See Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong, “Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances,” *Social Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2016): 5–19.

²⁰ Arthur Lewis, *Labour in the West Indies: The Birth of a Workers' Movement* (1939; repr., London: New Beacon, 1977). See Susan Craig's cogent critique of Lewis in the New Beacon edition's afterword.

mother a teacher, he studied on a scholarship at Port of Spain's St. Mary's College in the late 1930s—he was ultimately drawn to the demands of this unfolding moment, helping to found the Workers Freedom Movement in the late 1940s and in the 1950s playing activist roles in the Federated Workers Trade Union and West Indian Independence Party.²¹

In 1953, La Rose traveled to Vienna to attend the World Federation of Trade Unions Congress; he followed this with a tour of Eastern Europe and was dismayed to find that the Soviet project had become “so bureaucratic,” so mechanistic, that it could not truly respond to the needs of its people, propelling his commitment to an “independent Marxism.”²² Returning to Trinidad, he was blacklisted by the colonial government as a subversive; he also antagonized the main nationalist opposition, condemning Eric Williams as a “bourgeois nationalist” too sympathetic to international business and thus against the patriotic vision that, for La Rose, was espoused most powerfully by the trade union movement.²³ Forced into exile in 1958, La Rose relocated to Venezuela with his wife, Irma La Rose (née Hilaire), and secured work as a schoolteacher. In 1961, he arrived in the United Kingdom to study law, intending to stay for only three years. In London, La Rose found himself among a generation of Caribbean emigrants who, in Bill Schwarz's phrase, arrived “on the front line . . . of the unofficial work of decolonisation.”²⁴

²¹ Gus John, “La Rose, John Anthony (1927–2006),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), www.oxforddnb.com/index/101097081/John-La-Rose.

²² See “John La Rose Interviewed” for a description of this trip.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bill Schwarz, “Introduction: Crossing the Seas,” in Bill Schwarz, ed., *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 12.

La Rose would spend the rest of his life in London. Though his marriage to Irma would not survive the move, they would remain connected through their political work and their sons, Michael and Keith. The story of these subsequent decades reflects the fullness of life; however, a biographical account is not the object of this piece. But I do want to signal a few key moments within La Rose's new British political context before moving on to the question of political hope.

The metropolitan "front line" provoked a redescription of the category *West Indian*: through shared experiences of displacement and acknowledgment of common obstacles to life in Britain, Caribbean migrant communities would invest the term with new meaning.²⁵ In 1966, La Rose collaborated with two other West Indians—the Jamaican writer Andrew Salkey and the Bajan poet and scholar Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite—to form the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), precisely out of a desire for sociality around Caribbean culture in London but also to fulfil a sense of responsibility to the convulsions occurring in the Caribbean during this period. This was a conjuncture that David Scott, writing about CAM's journal *Savacou*, argues was characterized by a "sense of bitter disappointment": the collapse of hopes articulated in the 1930s and 1940s, and an emergent reality of "neocolonial and often repressive" new nation-states in the region.²⁶ For many inhabiting this world, disappointment facilitated radicalization: a shift to the left, the rise of Black Power, and a turn to *culture* as vital domain of struggle. In January 1968, La Rose and Salkey traveled to Cuba with C. L. R. James to participate in the Havana Cultural Congress, a signal moment in this reorientation toward questions of alienation and cultural

²⁵ Catherine Hall, "What Is a West Indian?," in Schwarz, *West Indian Intellectuals*, 31–50.

²⁶ David Scott, "The Paradox of Beginnings," *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009), x.

representation and part of a broader reevaluation of Marxism in a global context: in the shadow of Mao, after the 1956 Hungarian uprising.²⁷ In La Rose's Britain, this context would provoke a "New Left" to position "culture" as a constitutive dimension of postwar capitalism's novel social relations.²⁸ CAM, in comparison, would assert the value of "folk" African and Amerindian traditions against "generations of European cultural domination," debating the role of the artist in arousing national, social, and political consciousness.²⁹

Parallel to CAM emerged New Beacon Books, founded by La Rose and his partner Sarah White, the London-born activist and historian of science whom he had met in 1965 as part of a committee protesting against US intervention in the Dominican Republic.³⁰ The name paid tribute to the Trinidadian literary journal the *Beacon* (1931–33), edited by Albert Gomes, C. L. R James, and Alfred Mendes. A product of that 1930s shift in Caribbean political expression, the *Beacon* represented a belief that West Indians "must develop a literature and philosophy of their own."³¹ New Beacon sought similarly to intervene in the spheres of education and literary culture in Britain, even if La Rose drew clear distinctions between his politics and that of the earlier group.³² His relationship with a figure such as James exemplified his approach to questions of inheritance: there was no compulsion to break radically from the past but neither was this about deference to an earlier generation. James was La Rose's senior and respected interlocutor,

²⁷ See Andrew Salkey's candid *Havana Journal* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

²⁸ Stuart Hall, "Life and Times of the First New Left," *New Left Review*, no. 61 (January–February 2010): 177–96.

²⁹ Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement* (London: New Beacon, 1992), xvii, 53.

³⁰ See Bush, *Beacon of Hope*, 18.

³¹ Frank Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for a New Society* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 160–61.

³² See Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*, 31. La Rose and Gomes had been political opponents in Trinidad in the 1950s.

but their political collaborations were infrequent: La Rose found James too susceptible to flattery—something he thought incompatible with a revolutionary politics.³³ But the gesture of tribute, of thoughtful engagement, is evident in the name. New Beacon quickly expanded from a bookstall at CAM meetings to fill the front room of La Rose and White’s home in Finsbury Park; in 1973, it moved to its location on Stroud Green Road.

New Beacon’s expansion in the 1970s mirrors that of other West Indian political and cultural organizations pursuing what Alleyne calls “alternative systems of value and communication.”³⁴ The prioritization of autonomy was prompted by the advances of British commercial publishing houses seeking to exploit a Caribbean market but was also a reaction to the apparent challenge of maintaining creative freedoms in an unpredictable political context. Reading La Rose’s correspondence with Salkey in the 1970s, the imprisonment of dissident poet Herberto Padillo in Fidel Castro’s Cuba in 1971 provided clear warning. The artist, for John, must resist all attempts by bureaucracies and parties to bring creativity under state control: “It is for the artist,” he writes, “[to intervene] not only with his creation but with his explanation of his art—of its meaning to the process of humanising and culturising [*sic*] the leap into hope which is the revolutionary politics.” If not, he continues, the artist “becomes the nationalist symbol, the ornament”: “Art becomes objectified as culture, something acquired, not a long process which refines the sensibilities of social transformations. Art as object or ornament. Therefore it is a dead monument.”³⁵ John’s distinction between the “leap into hope” that art might facilitate and the threat of its

³³ “John La Rose Interviewed.”

³⁴ Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*, 2.

³⁵ JLR to Andrew Salkey, 7 January 1977, LRA/01/0698/1.

reduction to a “dead monument” would animate New Beacon’s commitment to creative freedom.

A concern for autonomy informed a variety of activist initiatives within London’s black communities: the New Beacon circle was central to the supplementary schools movement, an attempt to combat racism in the British education system not by petition or picketing but by providing an alternative space for black students to study and receive instruction. In the 1970s, education activism was consolidated in the Black Parents Movement and expanded to consider issues of police violence, housing access, and unemployment, allying with the Black Youth Movement and the Race Today Collective to produce what Linton Kwesi Johnson describes as “the most powerful cultural and political movement organized by blacks in Britain.”³⁶ This mobilization provided the background for La Rose’s collaboration with Race Today and Jessica Huntley of Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications to launch the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books in 1982, a cultural and political festival hosted annually and then biannually into the 1990s.³⁷ During the 1980s, New Beacon’s Stroud Green location would host all manner of local and international campaigns: from the New Cross Massacre Action Committee’s efforts to contest racist violence in London to the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya.

The end of the book fair and other activist initiatives in the 1990s can be seen, following Alleyne, as in part generational—connected to the simple fact of

³⁶ Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Obituary: John La Rose,” *The Guardian*, 4 March 2006.

³⁷ Sarah White, Roxy Harris, and Sharmilla Beezmohun, eds., *A Meeting of the Continents: The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books Revisited* (London: New Beacon, 2005).

getting older. Indeed, La Rose struggled with heart issues for many years. But it was not simply bodily health that took its toll. Reading the many letters sent between John and his friends, from Kingston to Chicago to Abuja, one is struck by the consistent evocation of “bleak times,” “bad turns,” disappointment, and uncertainty, even if these observations are always mitigated by a call to keep fighting. It is La Rose’s tremendous political energy sustained over busy and frustrating decades that requires us to take seriously the question of *hope* and the conditions for its expression. The precise character of this hope over the different stages of La Rose’s career is best thought of as fluctuating: whether it was, at points, the “prophetic hope” of a transformative, revolutionary politics or the “realist hope” of reformist politics.³⁸ I borrow here from Katrina Forrester’s writing on Judith Shklar to suggest that this is a “nonutopian” (rather than “antiutopian”) conception of hope—in the sense that “to have hope we need the possibility of realizing that hope,” whereas utopias represent, in Shklar’s words, “the timeless ‘ought’ that never ‘is.’”³⁹ This distinction is evident in the modest and pragmatic ways La Rose sought to effect change in the world around him—his interventions both as a “poet” and as an “architect.”

III. Politics and the “Leap into Hope”

A politics of hope is woven through La Rose’s reading and writing practice. He had an enduring relationship with the Guyanese poet Martin Carter’s 1951 poem “Looking at Your Hands,” and especially its final stanza:

³⁸ Katrina Forrester, “Hope and Memory in the Thought of Judith Shklar,” *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 595.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 600.

And so
 if you see me
 looking at your hands
 listening when you speak
 marching in your ranks
 you must know
 I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change
 the world.⁴⁰

Reflecting on the poem's significance in 2000, La Rose praised Carter for providing "an anthem of hope and aspiration for a world in postwar convulsion."⁴¹

Within this climate of convulsion, La Rose located hope in two apparently contrasting situations: the first, contingency; the second, continuity. We see again the animating contradiction between "movement" and "foundation": the "poet" and the "architect." By *poet*, I mean someone invested in convergence, chance, and the possibilities enabled by fragmentation. By *architect*, I mean a craftsman of origins: someone invested in stability—that "slow builder and consolidator." This dichotomy resonates with Paget Henry's identification of two competing traditions within Afro-Caribbean philosophy—that is, the poeticist and historicist traditions—but I am sympathetic to Bogue's amendment that what is important is not the autonomy of these traditions but rather shifts between the two.⁴² La Rose's distinction as a thinker is that he is not *just* an immigrant publisher preoccupied with issues of production and recognition, nor *simply* a poet-activist seeking to disrupt racist and capitalist structures in Britain

⁴⁰ Martin Carter, *The Hill of Fire Glows Red* (Georgetown, British Guiana: Miniature Poets, 1951).

⁴¹ John La Rose, "Martin Carter, 1927–1997—A Personal Memoir," in John La Rose, *Unending Journey: Selected Writings* (London: New Beacon, 2014), 79.

⁴² Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Bogue, "Writing Caribbean Intellectual History."

and elsewhere. His peculiar potential is located somewhere between foundation and movement, between architect and poet.

To start with the poet, with contingency: hope, for La Rose, could be generated through collaborations that did not need permanence or even a measure of “success” to be validated. CAM was a testament to this, especially in its rejection of any rigidly defined program, emphasizing instead what the Guyanese painter Aubrey Williams called *warishi* nights—*warishi* being the Amerindian term for “unburdening.”⁴³ Corresponding with Brathwaite in September 1967, John distinguishes between *structure* and *movement*:

We confront a multiplicity of hopes with an action and here we are. On this level CAM is a movement. A very real one. Not a structure. We too have struck a chord. With such things in my experience, people take out of it what they are looking for and bring what they must give. Then the communion is over. . . . The vital spark of life and spontaneity, I have discovered, in my own life, is not long-lasting. Glowing embers remain and we mistake it for fire. I mention this only that we would know what to expect.⁴⁴

His appreciation of CAM is invested in a *rejection* of permanence: in finding a way to *embrace* endings. Alleyne argues that this spirit carries on in the New Beacon Circle’s reluctance to pursue anything like a mass membership, embracing a leadership style that was *not* about vanguardism but about question posing and the facilitation of debate.⁴⁵

What of the “slow builder,” the architect? La Rose sought momentum for possible futures in the identification of historical continuity, usually asserted in terms of a radical or rebellious “tradition” but which may be more usefully described as acknowledging an inheritance, a burden of responsibility to past

⁴³ Louis James, “The Caribbean Artists Movement,” in Schwarz, *West Indian Intellectuals*, 217.

⁴⁴ JLR to Edward Brathwaite, 4 September 1967, LRA/01/143/4.

⁴⁵ Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*, 131–32.

struggles. In this sense, his thought resonates with C. L. R. James, who argued that for West Indians to come to terms with their predicament, they must acquire consciousness as “historical individuals.”⁴⁶ James’s problematic is echoed in La Rose’s critique of what he calls “cultures of hiatus”—a condition of ahistoricity triggered, in his account, by colonial rule in the Caribbean. The belief—enshrined in the colonial education system—that it was British enlightenment that dismantled slavery in the Caribbean served to detach, for La Rose, West Indians from the “source and wellspring of an ancient affliction which lay at the root of [their] trying ambiguity.”⁴⁷ New Beacon’s publication practice was, in part, designed to combat this “discontinuity”: filling the gap between 1838, when slavery was abolished, and the outbreak of labor unrest in the 1930s. Restoring a lineage of struggle would “give people some sense of what is important, so that they get some sense of what they need to know to transform their lives.”⁴⁸

Two of the earliest books published by New Beacon were reprints of nineteenth-century texts by the Trinidadian schoolteacher John Jacob Thomas: 1869’s *Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* and 1889’s *Froudacity*, both republished in 1969 and the latter now recognized as “the formative text of black West Indian intellectual self-determination.”⁴⁹ *Froudacity*, in Bill Schwarz’s description, was a “guerrilla movement, in the field of ideas,” wherein a black schoolteacher from Trinidad confronts the Regius Professor of History at Oxford, James Anthony Froude—passionate advocate of Empire whose famously racist

⁴⁶ Schwarz, “Introduction: Crossing the Seas,” 4.

⁴⁷ JLR, speaking in 1973, quoted in Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*, 117.

⁴⁸ JLR, 1977 interview cited in Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*, 44.

⁴⁹ Schwarz, “Introduction: Crossing the Seas,” 4.

Caribbean travelogue spoke of the “immovability of black inferiority.”⁵⁰ New Beacon’s 1969 version came with an introduction from C. L. R. James, focusing on the “Caribbean human condition” that produced Thomas—“To know him well is to know ourselves better.”⁵¹ James notes that this black schoolmaster’s model of repelling racist polemic remained relevant: “The reply to imperialist grime is not often, even to this day, as firm and as precise as was the reply of this West Indian to this attack upon his people. . . . In 1968 Thomas is more important than when he wrote in 1888.”⁵²

La Rose would note his happiness, in a 1969 letter, that New Beacon was “able to renew an acquaintance with [Thomas]” as remedy for the “unhistorical culture of hiatus in which each generation has so far lived.”⁵³ New Beacon’s selective catalogue would pair republications and historical interventions with new fiction and poetry. Each volume was intended, in its different way, to reconfigure one’s sense of the present and the possibilities within it. Against cultures of hiatus, La Rose illuminated continuity. Writing in 1998, he reflected on Caribbean history with a keen sense of momentum: “Out of the revolts, maroon wars, and blood-soaked struggles against slavery and colonialism, against racial arrogance and imperial domination; out of the general strikes and popular insurrections, especially those from 1935 to 1938; out of the birth of trade unions and mass organisations; out of the origins of autonomous cultural

⁵⁰ Ibid.; Hall, “What Is a West Indian?,” 46.

⁵¹ C. L. R. James, “The West Indian Intellectual,” introduction to John Jacob Thomas, *Froudacity: West Indian Fables Explained* (1889; repr., London: New Beacon, 1969), 48.

⁵² Ibid., 23, 47.

⁵³ JLR to James Millette, 2 January 1969, LRA/01/0527.

expressiveness there emerged, over a long historical period, a search to redress the past and produce original beacons towards a luminous future.”⁵⁴

The idea to establish an archive could be seen as an attempt to tame and *order* this history: to secure an authoritative account against “cultures of hiatus.” This understanding is consistent with the institution of the archive—its emphasis on permanence and preservation—and indeed, in reading John’s letters, the gesture of collection is often made in times of threat or precarity. So in January 1974 La Rose writes to Brathwaite, “The future is deadly and promising. We are all at risk. . . . We need badly an Institute of Oral History and Culture or a journal to get moving. . . . The 30s generation are about to die out. We can start with them and move forward.”⁵⁵ In spite of this clear desire for foundation, for a stable edifice that might weather the storm, the “poet” does not disappear, with important implications for the GPI and its function as an archive.

Indeed, John would reiterate his 1960s injunction to remain “constantly inventive and novel” in 1992, a year after the GPI was founded, updating his nomadic sensibility for a post–Cold War world and its new ideologues.⁵⁶ “Unlike [Francis] Fukuyama,” he writes, “I think that history, the story, has no end and that man is lasting and enduring. Home, then, is a kind of solid moving foothold, in the imagination, the dream, in the uneasy voyage of hope, in the uncertain complexity of fulfilment. There is no fixity nor can there be any.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ John La Rose, “Honouring George Padmore (Address at SOAS, October 1998),” in La Rose, *Unending Journey*, 72–73.

⁵⁵ JLR to Edward Brathwaite, 29 January 1974, LRA/01/143/4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24 February 1969.

⁵⁷ John La Rose, “Everchanging Immanence of Culture (Address at ARIB Conference, London, March 1992),” in La Rose, *Unending Journey*, 54–55.

This tension between the architect and the poet—the desire to fix and the refusal of fixity—is central to understanding the GPI. The metaphor of the “beacon” allows us to capture this dynamic of both/also: something stable, rooted in place, but which is only successful if it propels movement, if it can be left behind.

IV. The Archive that Subverts Itself

The George Padmore Institute can be traced back to conversations occurring as early as the 1960s, but it was not until the late 1980s that a formal agenda for the institution came together: prompted, in part, by a desire to aggregate documents related to CAM.⁵⁸ So it was to be an “archive” from the beginning, even if this role was to be inseparable from that of assembly space and resource center. Central to the vision for the institute was the need to provide continuity to the International Book Fair, which—owing in part to John’s health problems—was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain, relying on a shifting volunteer base.⁵⁹ For Roxy Harris, a key member of the New Beacon Circle, the GPI had created a “new situation”: a chance “to carry on the spirit of the book fair in another way.” Writing in 1995, Harris argues that the institute “should be a new focus for the expression of radical political and cultural ideas including the organisation of forums etc with Africa and the Black diaspora.” The Book Fair would end that year, but the institute provided “a springboard [for] promoting similar ideas . . . in an ongoing and less concentrated fashion.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Anne Walmsley to JLR, 14 April 1988, LRA/01/0811.

⁵⁹ White, Harris, and Beezmohun, *Meeting of the Continents*.

⁶⁰: Roxy Harris, “The Future of the International Book Fair,” May 1995, International Book Fairs Collection, BFC/12/01/01/07, GPI.

The GPI was officially founded in 1991, though the archive would not properly open to the public until 2005.⁶¹ In 1994, building and conversion work began above the bookshop at 76 Stroud Green to create storage space and meeting rooms. Funding for this was raised largely through individual donations, solicited through venues like the book fair. By 1997, the GPI was “up and running,” but the process of setting up an archival structure would be long and slow.⁶² Speaking to members of the New Beacon Circle, the decision to name the institute after George Padmore is described as a natural outcome of John’s desire to “connect continents.” In the 1960s and 1970s, La Rose had proposed the creation of a “John Jacob Thomas Institute,”⁶³ but one might speculate that there is something about this moment, at the end of the Cold War, when La Rose and his associates saw fit to affirm Padmore’s internationalist, heterodox socialism, almost as an alternative globalization to that proposed by Fukuyama and his ilk. This was a different world from the 1960s moment of shifting metropole/colony relations that propelled interest in a figure such as Thomas, and indeed Padmore – unlike his contemporary, C. L. R. James – was primarily conceived as an *organizer*, constantly on the move with an ambivalent relationship to foundation.⁶⁴ Padmore’s internationalism would serve further to differentiate the New Beacon Circle from the ethnic or racial nationalisms attracting

⁶¹ The 1990s were a period of collection, training, and early conservation work; formal cataloguing commenced in May 2003, and the archive was “officially” launched in 2006. Thanks to Sarah Garrod for clarity on this sequence.

⁶² JLR to Abdul Alkalimat, 19 June 1997, LRA/01/0042/12. On setting up the structure of the archive, see chapter 3 of Alleyne, *Radicals Against Race*.

⁶³ JLR to Edward Brathwaite, 24 February 1969, LRA/01/143/4; see also the diary entry for 3 May 1970, LRA/02/01/02/02.

⁶⁴ Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2015), 10–11.

allegiance elsewhere in black British politics.⁶⁵ In a 1999 letter introducing the archive, La Rose writes: “Padmore’s vision was of a world unburdened from the arrogance and tribulation of empires and dedicated to equality, solidarity and hope. We have named our Institute after George Padmore as we see it continuing the traditions which shaped his life—independent, radical vision and outlook connecting the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, North America and Asia.”⁶⁶

It may be useful here to contrast the GPI’s project with other archival initiatives, especially those discussed by Deborah Thomas in her important work on Caribbean archive building.⁶⁷ In the first place, the GPI cannot be easily contained in the category of “counter-archive,” in the sense that it focuses on autonomous production rather than reaction: it does not seek to undermine or contest existing, official archives with oppositional narratives, nor does its potency rely on a relational stance. The GPI’s collection has not grown through concerted research into the past, the search for “alternative histories”—a philosophy that propels initiatives such as Robert A. Hill’s collection of the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers in the United States. Hill’s project is characterized by the desire for comprehensive excavation, a careful archaeology exposing the manifold contours of a mass movement and as such countering a “history of New World black deracination, subjection and exclusion.”⁶⁸ Indeed, though Padmore gives the institute a name,

⁶⁵ On the stakes of this differentiation, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); and Kalbir Shukra, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1998).

⁶⁶ JLR to Andrew Durham, 24 February 1999, LRA/01/540/04.

⁶⁷ Thomas’s main frame of reference is the national or state archive in the Caribbean, but her typology remains provocative for thinking about archives more generally. Deborah Thomas, “Caribbean Studies.”

⁶⁸ David Scott, “On the Archaeologies of Black Memory,” *Anthurium* 6, no. 1 (2008): 1; and “The Papers,” in Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers, Volume 1* (Berkeley:

he is not present in its documentary collection. The GPI has made public what was already on New Beacon's shelves, allowing access to documents from the various struggles waged by the New Beacon Circle since the 1960s and providing a home for papers donated by fellow travelers.⁶⁹

The GPI, in this sense, also exceeds Thomas's category of an "archive of reparation" in that it does not aim to aggregate accounts of violence, toward some desired end of reparative justice—even if a search for justice has been central to the campaigns it archives, notably, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee. The GPI can partially be described as an "archive of vindication"—in the sense that it *is* about celebrating radical struggles and dissident cultural productions, but this too is complicated by its reluctance to build monuments, the fact that the beacon is *not* a destination.

The refiguring of archive as beacon makes sense if we think about the importance of education to the New Beacon Circle. Education requires some form of authority, but one that in critical pedagogical terms should be self-subverting: the teacher aims to pass on all they know, such that the student becomes an equal and can also assume the role of teacher. "George Padmore," indeed, was originally the name given to a supplementary school run by La Rose and White in their front room in the 1970s—premised on an alternative curriculum to combat negative cultural stereotyping in British schools and to give young people the chance to learn about Caribbean history and culture.⁷⁰

University of California Press, 1983), xci–xcvi. The first ten volumes of Hill's series were published by University of California Press (1983–2006), with volumes 11–13 issued by Duke University Press (2011–16).

⁶⁹ Most recently, those of the Hackney education activist Joan Goody.

⁷⁰ The GPI holds collections on the Black Education Movement (1965–88) and National Association for Supplementary Schools (1975–2005). See also Bernard Coard, *How the West*

Authority in the school was properly self-subverting, such that early generations of students—including John’s sons Michael and Wole (his child with Sarah White)—would later become teachers.

The GPI has not positioned itself as a monument to struggles now past, nor has it set out to excavate a world no longer present. The archive is proffered to counter “cultures of hiatus,” to affirm a sense of momentum, using the past to inform horizons of the possible. This is seen in the collection’s emphasis on *process*, on a certain “do-it-yourself” sensibility: there are protest placards on the backs of used cardboard boxes, banners on bedsheets, flyers of all sizes and of immense number, poster designs and poster templates, a sense of overwhelming energy charging the archive, notes on *everything*—crowding old envelopes, on the backs of business cards, in the margins of newspaper clippings. I draw attention to this because it underlines how the GPI anticipates recent debates in archive studies around questions of the digital and how new technologies have disrupted traditional archival formats. The German media theorist Wolfgang Ernst argues that the new, digital archive is “‘ephemeral,’ multi-sensual, corresponding with a dynamic user culture which is less concerned with records for eternity than with order by fluctuation.” Without underestimating the radically new possibilities allowed by digital technology, I want to suggest that the *epistemological reformulation* demanded by scholars like Ernst had already been made with the GPI—at the cusp of the digital age—wherein archival memory was to be liberated from its “reductive subjection to the discourse of history” and reinstalled “as an agency of multiple temporal poetics in its own

right.”⁷¹ These are Ernst’s words, but resonate with La Rose’s desire to facilitate “leaps into hope” and elide the creation of “dead monuments.” The GPI allows an opportunity to detach the discussion of archival poetics from the realm of the digital and interrogate more directly the peculiar philosophy of history that facilitates such dynamic, multisensual engagements. Here, it is not a futurist technophilia but rather the product of a passionate political project, responding to a particular Caribbean experience of modernity but also demonstrating a creative engagement with the predicament of establishing and sustaining institutions that serve a politics of incitement.

Theorists like Ernst describe the “anarchival” or “anarchic archive” as an intellectual or artistic fantasy—in the sense that digital and photographic archives continue to be informed by order and technomathematical structures.⁷² Certainly the GPI is structured by formal archival conventions around storage, preservation, and classification, and it has been overseen, since the early 2000s, by the professional archivist Sarah Garrod.⁷³ Moreover, against the self-subverting ideal of the beacon, the temptation to monumentalize remains powerful: consider, for instance, the way La Rose has come to stand in for the New Beacon project more generally, when—as I have noted—it was from the beginning a joint initiative between himself and Sarah White, supported by a much broader “circle.” If we can ask, “What does an archive built by a poet *look* like?,” we should also ask, “What does the archive *do* to the poet?” How are La

⁷¹ Wolfgang Ernst, “Radically De-Historicising the Archive: Decolonising Archival Memory from the Supremacy of Historical Discourse,” in L’Internationale Online and Rado Ištók, eds., *Decolonising Archives* (e-publication 2016), 15, 12; www.internationaleonline.org/bookshelves/decolonising_archives.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷³ La Rose had originally solicited advice from Andrew Durham of National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool. See LRA/01/540/04.

Rose and his legacy transformed by the accumulation and cataloguing of his personal papers? In this instance, the implications are certainly gendered—even taking into account Sarah’s desire to avoid the limelight and her insistence that New Beacon was indeed a product of John’s vision.⁷⁴

Still, the GPI sustains a shifting identity between the architectonic and the poetic. Alongside academic researchers, the GPI works with local schools, runs workshops, facilitates visiting performance groups, and, in 2016—New Beacon’s fiftieth-anniversary year—hosted its first poet-in-residence, Jay Bernard.⁷⁵ Documents regularly *leave* the archive for exhibitions and workshops; an ethic of tactility is something endorsed and ensured by Garrod. If the traditional archive is characterized by isolation, by strict terms of access, the GPI strives here to facilitate the opposite.⁷⁶ Its distinction is not as an *anomaly* with regard to conventional archival institutions but as an overlooked *model*—organized around a democratic communicative ethos, insisting on autonomy and deftly navigating precarity. Its promise appears explicit in a conjuncture where a boom in grassroots archival initiatives coincides with the accelerating violence of austerity policies to community institutions in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Bush carefully negotiates this aspect in her history of New Beacon, which strives to establish the venture as a partnership between La Rose and White. See also Roxy Harris’s tribute to Sarah in *Foundations of a Movement*, 64.

⁷⁵ Bernard’s poetry sequence ‘Surge’, which is based on their engagement with the GPI collections, is published alongside Ruth Bush’s history of New Beacon Books in the 2016 volume *Beacon of Hope*.

⁷⁶ Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*. On a “decolonized commons,” see Achille Mbembe, *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive* (Africa Is a Country EBook, 2016), africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive.

⁷⁷ See Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, nos. 1–2 (2009): 71–86.

The GPI's future has been and remains uncertain, with funding won through bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund available only for fixed terms and specific activities. But the legacy of hope in contingency remains. Interviewed for Ruth Bush's history of New Beacon, Sarah White referred to La Rose's comments on the end of CAM, when he wrote that "organisations flourish, flower, they belong to a certain time, and then they die." White adds, reflecting on New Beacon: "To be quite honest I think we have to begin to think about . . . how does one come to . . . a successful ending."⁷⁸ Bush, in her history, mentions that the GPI is a key part of this transition from the work of New Beacon, but what I want to suggest is that the possibility of "ending" is already built in to this idea of archive as beacon: being left behind is part of its function, part of the measure of its success.

The GPI's union of a radical politics with the institution of the archive helps to focus a difficult question: How does one preserve that "leap into hope" without creating another "dead monument"? John La Rose, his philosophy of history, Sarah White, and the New Beacon Circle give us resources to think about this predicament—not simply as a thought experiment but as something that has been tested in practice, in the career of the GPI. How to conceive hope in a time of disappointment, collapse? How to protect the past for the future, to honor its liveliness in the present? In the vision of the archive as beacon—an archive that subverts itself—the GPI demonstrates the possibility of an active, dialogic relationship with the past, emphasizing history's capacity to incite new politics

⁷⁸ Bush, *Beacon of Hope*, 43. At the time of writing, money is being raised to refurbish the New Beacon bookshop, spurred in part by the energy of John La Rose's grandson Renaldo and his wife Vanessa, opening another chapter in the circle's generational sequence.

in the present: foundations for a movement, a “solid moving foothold” toward uncertain futures.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ La Rose, “Everchanging Immanence,” 54–55.