

The prescience of *Staying Power*: in praise of Peter Fryer

Colin Grant

The phrase 'think black' first surfaced for me while reading *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, written more than 40 years ago by Peter Fryer. The book remains the seminal work on the history of black British lives. Peter Fryer, a white English communist, was aware that some black people might object to him telling the story, but he promised in the preface to 'make the effort to "think black" – i.e. to grasp imaginatively as well as intellectually the essence of the black historical experience.' Nonetheless, when *Staying Power* was published in 1984, Fryer was the target of hateful abuse. The historian Paul Gilroy viewed the criticism as being 'dished out by resentful, lazy and hostile community spokespeople who told [Fryer] that he had no right to undertake the work because this particular history of suffering was their own special property'.

Casting back over his early life, the roots of Fryer's engagement with oppressed and marginalised people is evident. In 1945, aged 18, Fryer joined the Communist Party. By 21 he was working as a journalist for the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the *Morning Star* (formerly the *Daily Worker*). That year he travelled out to Tilbury Docks, east of London, to cover the disembarkation of HMT *Empire Windrush* bearing, as he put it, '500 pairs of willing hands from Jamaica'. He got those details wrong: there were, in fact, more than 800 people on that ship and many were from other Caribbean islands. But Fryer later excelled as a groundbreaking historian. Reporting on the 1956 Hungarian uprising against Soviet domination, he broke with the Communist Party.

Fryer was reportedly a tough but tender man with an early love of jazz, and it was his enthusiasm for this aspect of black culture that led him to think more broadly about the relatively unwritten story of black people in Britain. Ambalavaner Sivanandan, the former director of the Institute of Race Relations, had argued in 1982 – before the publication of *Staying Power* – that 'traces of black life have been removed from the British past to ensure that blacks are not part of the British future'. Fryer agreed.

Staying Power came at a period of division in the UK. As well as state-sponsored police harassment of black youths, there was immense hostility towards the black population, especially in the aftermath of the Brixton riots in 1981.

Fryer was galvanised to change the narrative; the riots were an unsurprising fireball of anger resulting not just from heavy-handed policing but from decades of injustice and oppression. Without any financial backing or a university post, Fryer embarked on an epic research project that became *Staying Power*, a 500-page survey of more than a thousand years of black life in Britain.

The cultural life of black migrants and their descendants had never figured in the work of conservative historians. But neither did they appear to fit into the model of the working class conceived by radical historians on the British left such as E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). In writing a history with black people at its centre, Fryer challenged the belief that the working class was a homogenous and indigenous group.

Peter Fryer grew up as a citizen of an imperial power that had dominated black lives in many parts of the world. He understood that his writing would 'entail a painful rethinking of basic assumptions' about black people. *Staying Power* is not the

voyeuristic work of a tourist with a typewriter, but that of someone deeply invested in the subject, who yearns to reach beyond what they know.

The dilemma over the portrayal of black life by white writers has its roots in the power dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade. Slave narratives mark the first serious attempts by black people to write about their own lives. Early on, a number of these testimonies were dictated to well-meaning white abolitionists who were determined to act as conduits for a largely white reading public, bringing to its attention a so-called 'black message inside a white envelope'.

Slave narratives, memoirs and testimonies offer compelling individual stories of black lives, but it is the role of the historian to pull these strands together, to create a coherent picture. What happens, then, when no black historians step up to do the job? Peter Fryer is what happens. Fryer stepped into a vacuum and made an effort to write about the complexity of black British life at a time when notable black intellectuals, such as the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, steered clear of race, choosing instead to focus on class.

In 2009, casting his mind back to that period, Hall attempted to explain the oversight: 'In relation to black culture and the life of ordinary black people, I really didn't know

what it was about in any depth and I couldn't get to it. I was a middle-class brown schoolboy with middle-class parents, I couldn't reach it. I could sort of imagine it and relate to it by empathy, but I couldn't be of it.' Hall is contending here, then, that colour does *not* privilege understanding.

'Thinking black' cannot take anyone the whole way to the experience of 'being black'. There is no singular black experience. And to interpret the past a great imaginative leap is necessary, no matter what your colour. Peter Fryer supplied a vision of history that was underpinned with compassion and extraordinarily deep research, even as he acknowledged the limitations of his perspective. 'All who venture into this field,' he wrote, 'must sooner or later ponder the West African saying: "Knowledge is like the baobab tree; one person's arms cannot encompass it".' But Fryer's reach was broad, and in writing his book, this white man broke bread with black readers.

I sympathise with the notion that black people should be the authors of their own stories because for too long have others spoken for us. But Fryer composed a vivid, passionate and intelligent book that every black writer I know, myself included, would have been enormously proud to have produced. I am team Fryer.

Colin Grant

Colin Grant's books include *Bageye at the Wheel*, short-listed for the Pen Ackerley Prize, and *Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush Generation*, a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week. Other books include *I'm Black So You Don't Have to Be*, and his oral history of migration to Britain, *What We Leave We Carry*, which was published in June 2026. Grant is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and director of *WritersMosaic*, an online magazine and division of the Royal Literary Fund. He also writes for a number of newspapers including the *TLS*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *The New York Review of Books*.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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