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Basil Olton

# Chris Braithwaite, aka Jones: an introduction

Dorothy Rose du Boulay

It was during my first foray into further education, in a rather dusty copy of Edward Scobie's *Black Britannia*, that I first discovered my maternal grandfather, Chris Braithwaite, in an official context. It was the mid 1980s and, despite the fact that it had first been published in 1972, I had never before heard mention of this book. It was a chance discovery, selected solely because of its title; which was in many ways contemporaneous with the temperature of the era. For it had suddenly become acceptable, fashionable even, to be both black *and* British.

Within its pages, my grandfather is referred to as the 'Secretary' of the *International African Service Bureau* – also something I had never before heard mention of. Scobie's description of the IASB as a forerunner of the Pan African Federation was therefore enormously helpful in positioning the work of my grandfather and his esteemed comrades as something that was, and still is, relevant. It was both exciting and daunting to discover that, together with his comrades, my grandfather had campaigned against imperialism in all of its unpleasant manifestations; campaigns that had taken them to the very heart of the British establishment.

Scobie's book functioned as a useful gateway to further enquiry, for up until this point, my grandfather had been portrayed by family elders as a sort of minor celebrity. A man acquainted with the famous and connected

– from Kwame Nkrumah to Paul Robeson – but with enough heart to cook fish and rice for his neighbours in Turners Road, Stepney; where, sadly, many were ravaged by hunger. Even more reverentially, they would mention his very personal involvement in the defence of the young men collectively known as the 'Scottsboro Boys'. This all seemed rather fantastical to me, for, somewhat naively, I assumed that black people in Britain lacked the agency to organise and protest, at least beyond rioting or carnival.

It was much later, in my postgraduate years that I resumed my attempt to combine the personal and political life of Chris Braithwaite. The prompt was a class on female modernist writers, which included Nancy Cunard and Ethel Mannin. This led me to Mannin's *Comrade O Comrade* (1947), which in parts is based upon, and dedicated to, 'Chris Jones', and Cunard's (1934) *Negro* anthology. This original, rare version contains photographs of my grandfather; at a rally in Trafalgar Square and at a May Day march in Beech Street, EC1 – images subsequently excluded from the more widely available, abridged version. It also contains a photograph of Ada Wright, whom my grandfather had personally escorted to the opening night of a Scottsboro defence fundraising concert. Consequently, I was able to draw some of the threads together as I had first heard mention of Ethel Mannin, Nancy Cunard and Ada Wright in conversations with Auntie Pam, Chris

Chris Braithwaite. Image courtesy of Dorothy Rose du Boulay.



Braithwaite's eldest daughter. This led me to probe further, to gather a more detailed oral history, for reading about Chris Braithwaite, who is interchangeably referred to as Chris Jones, was at times, unsettling. Why was it even necessary to hide? And from whom? It was Auntie Pam who confirmed that he sometimes had to use an alias to protect

his family and position at the docks. She had visited George Padmore's residence in Camden on many occasions and, in addition to noting that he had no telephone, stated that 'they never spoke on the phone, because they were all being watched by Special Branch'.

Could it be that the ideas and actions of my grandfather and his comrades managed to be at once noble and seditious? When I consider occurrences such as the resignation en masse from the Communist Party of Great Britain, to form the unapologetically black IASB, or an article written by my grandfather entitled 'Why the Colonial Workers oppose Conscription', it seems entirely possible.

They had committed no crime, *as such*, yet the available files contain many, many redactions; so much so, that myself, and numerous others besides, have been compelled to reinstate that narrative. The boldly provocative *A Necessary Fiction* presents a reassembling of that hidden history that takes us far beyond the realms of archive and academia. As such, Basil Olton has perfectly captured both the struggle and the ideological optimism of Chris Braithwaite; a self-proclaimed ordinary man who achieved extraordinary things.

# Reflections on 'A Necessary Fiction'

Dr C Underhill

Basil Olton's cylindrical shapes may be initially interpreted as 'redacted' black plinths, or pillars. They can be creatively interpreted as omitted material from, or in defiance of, the grandiose whitewashed columns of the archive library they are situated in.

However, another observation reveals them to be compellingly intact objects that contrast perilously with the intimidating arc of this statutory space. Olton's sculptures are small by the scale of this interior, but have an insistent presence and could act like a full stop or mark to emphasise meaning.

These shapes have a clean line of form drawn with the elegance of a continuous gesture and are visibly handmade, incrementally built. In the simplicity of their conception and production, these forms dramatise the site and its function, yet they also discreetly and patiently concentrate thought onto a bigger picture that can say something about the human condition. You know how the artist used his hands to create these shapes. You know how high or low he had to reach to position them. You can feel the time and labour of their production.

Stuart Hall talked of the impossibility of 'speaking' the trauma of historical events. His use of the phrase 'a necessary fiction' was put to work in thinking about possible revised identities, representations of and for the

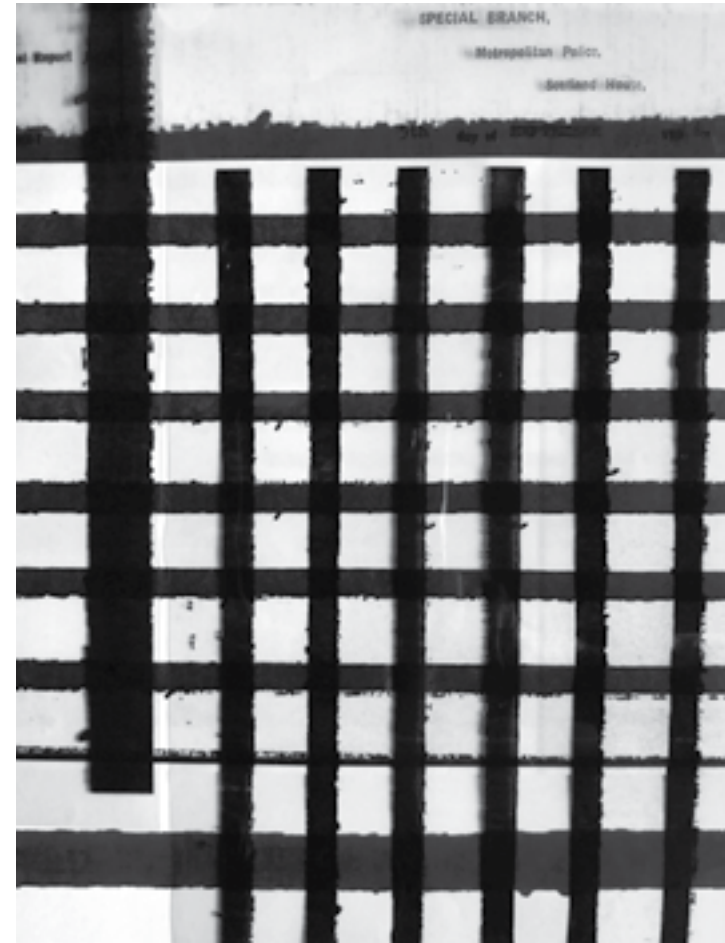
1. One of the most referenced discourses on Stuart Hall's idea of new ethnicities is the essay 'New Ethnicities', Chapter 21 of 'ICA Documents 7: Black Film, British Cinema' edited by Kobena Mercer, 1989.

'expression' of the subjugated. He describes 'New Ethnicities'<sup>1</sup> that give way to the end of black essentialism and its 'innocence', which reflect the complexities and fluidity of contemporary life. But, crucially, this must be without giving way to the desecrating dilution of its cause. These narratives he identifies as reinvigorating and speaking afresh the great injustices the human species has committed against itself. Running with this ideal one might imagine newly forged identities that fill out the bodies of old and new archetypes. These are voices that have not lost their connections with stories of the past, they are paced with the motions of their legacy. There is something theatrical and potentially poetic in the rhetoric of this model.

Olton's choice of 'A Necessary Fiction' for the title of this exhibition suggests such a narrative for a project like this that responds to and discreetly interprets the archived documentation of past and almost previously forgotten political activism with the bureaucratic intricacies of employment history. More specifically it also suggests the narrative of the life and work of Chris Braithwaite may offer itself to be read in this way.

Braithwaite, played out much of his public and extra-professional life under the fictional pseudo-name of Jones. His biography reads as a complex and mixed shifting of roles

*Anecdotal evidence*  
Mixed media collage  
2017



that variously filled many transitional and potentially conflicting spaces and expectations. Through the filter of Stuart Hall's model we can understand these factors to have made up the 'necessary fiction' Braithwaite/Jones had to inhabit in order to give voice to the struggle against racial prejudice and oppression he felt compelled to confront.

Chris Braithwaite's formative years as a sailor were spent on the nation-less and merciless plateau of the sea. He worked and lived up close with some of the globe's most singularly punished working class. His experience of hard labour in claustrophobic conditions, viscerally intimate with his peers, saw a prolonged hardship that would have been made painfully distinct by an



**Basil Olton** works primarily with ceramics and the still image. Perceptions of identity and belonging in a post-colonial world are an underlying theme in his work and practice whilst questioning the fragility of the narrative of dominant power structures and the interplay between memory and desire. He is currently investigating how the material properties of clay are able to capture a memory or reflection of a space as a site of commemoration and how the physical patterns of memory are manifest when projected into the supporting environment.

Recently shortlisted for the Camden Arts Centre Ceramics Fellowship, Basil has exhibited at Schwartz Gallery, London; Politics of Experience, xxn @ Jonathan Kemp, <http://xxn.org.uk/doku.php>, London and ICFF in New York.

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