Bunce, Robin, and Paul Field. "Race Today: 'Come What May we are Here to Stay'." *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 153–170. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544407.ch-012>>.

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Race Today: ‘Come What May we are Here to Stay’

It may be revolutionary to suggest that we ought now to become a country where immigrants are welcome, but that is really the logical development of our present position in the world. . . . Who is going to pay for the old age pensions and social services we are rightly distributing now, unless we have an addition to our population which only immigrants will provide in the days to come?

James Callaghan 19 June 1946 (Cohen 2003: 74)

The foundation of the Race Today Collective was contemporaneous with a huge conceptual shift in the British Black Power Movement. Members of the Collective made an important transition from seeing themselves as immigrants or children of immigrants to identifying themselves as British. For Howe, this new orientation was summed up in the phrase, which emerged from Asian campaigns in the East End, ‘Come what may we are here to stay.’ The Collective’s overarching objective was to play a part in the fight to secure immigrants the full rights of citizenship. This new orientation reflected the reality of the situation in Britain. Whatever their intention on leaving the Caribbean or the Indian sub-continent, immigrants were having families, buying homes and establishing themselves as a permanent part of British society. What is more, Howe was influenced by James Callaghan’s 1946 speech, which acknowledged Britain’s dependence on immigrant labour. Howe concluded that economic imperatives and the desires of the black population were pushing Britain in the direction of a multicultural society.

Howe conceived the role of the Collective in a larger context. Speaking in 1981, he argued:

... I do not believe, comrades and friends, that there is anybody in this room who can deny the fact, the historical fact, that black workers in this country,

who are formerly colonial peoples, are in the forefront of contesting trade union bureaucracy, the exploitation of the workers at Grunwick . . .

(James 1981: 6)

In this sense, the Collective would play a role beyond the black community, as the black community itself helped to rejuvenate the British worker's movement. Indeed, the fight for black rights was part of a broader civilizing mission to reclaim British society from state-sponsored savagery.

It is not difficult, comrades, to know that the way the British government is seeking to keep order in Ireland is by means of tanks, guns and torture chambers. It is clear to us that the way the British government, successive governments, seek to keep order among blacks is by way of the Special Patrol Group (SPG), and collaboration of the courts. So we have to be concerned with the creeping barbarism, not only concerned but mustering all our forces to defeat it.

(Ibid., 5)

Undoubtedly, this was a circuitous route to revolution, but a route on which the black population and the fight for black rights would play a crucial role. Thus, with Howe as editor, *Race Today* quickly became a campaigning journal. The Collective helped foster self-organization, while the magazine recorded the struggles.

At first, the Collective was something of an enigma. Howe recalls that local black community mistook them for social workers. The white left were also perplexed. The radical Collective did not fit easily into any of the mainstream leftist schemas. By the late 1970s, however, the Collective had established itself as an essential part of the Brixton community. As a result, the offices at 74 Shakespeare Road, and from mid-1982 at 165 Railton Road, became a hive of activity, a place that was frequented by local people, councillors, community organizers, artists of various descriptions and, on a good day, world-class cricketers. The Collective's influence was felt far outside London. Through contacts with Max Farrar, Ali Hussein and Gus John, through developing a reputation as the authentic voice of the black community, the Collective became, as Hassan puts it, 'the centre, in England, of black liberation' (Hassan 2011).

Backing protests

'Imperial Typewriters' comments Howe, 'that was ours'. The July 1974 issue of *Race Today* covered the strike by Asian workers at Imperial Typewriters

in Leicester. Asian workers downed tools at the Copdale Road factory on 1 May 1974 in protest at discriminatory pay and promotions. *Race Today* had a distinctive position on immigrant workers. Immigrant workers, Howe points out, were not born in British hospitals, nor educated in British schools. Therefore, they cost the country nothing. And yet their labour, their skills, their consumption and their tax contributed to the wealth of the nation. Clearly, Howe argued, immigrant workers were a net benefit to the country. Equally, Howe recognized that British employers unwittingly played a progressive role in the creation of a multicultural society. Employers, Howe claims, actively encouraged black and Asian workers to invite their families and friends to Britain and work in their factories and workshops. Certainly, the employers were exploitative, but employing immigrant labour made economic sense. Howe's analysis was distinctive as it undercut the moralizing that characterized the British debate on immigration (Howe 2011d).

The Imperial Typewriter's strike exposed the moral complexity of issues related to immigrant workers. As well as exposing the exploitative nature of the employers, it highlighted the shocking shortcomings of the British labour movement. Rather than backing the workers, the conflict demonstrated the complicity of unions with management. Quickly, the strike metamorphosed into 'a fight against the Transport and General Workers' Union' (Veenhoven 1975: 534). Initially, the TGWU washed its hands of the striking workers. TGWU Chair Bill Batstone summed up the union's attitude thus: '[t]he Asians cannot come here and make their own rules' (Thompson 1988: 73). Howe travelled to Leicester, moved in with one of the striking workers and spoke on the picket line. Along with other members of the Collective, he helped to organize the movement. Without union support, the 3-month strike was sustained by funds provided by local Asian community and businesses. The Imperial Typewriters strike and the Grunwick dispute of 1977 reflected the very political dynamics that the Collective had anticipated. Neither was aiming to overthrow the state or usher in socialism. Rather, immigrant workers won recognition by the union movement, forced the union movement to rethink its essentially conservative position and began to secure immigrant rights. While the Grunwick dispute was the watershed moment, the Imperial Typewriters strike was the first step towards full union recognition for immigrant workers. For this reason, Howe argues that it was 'one of the most powerful strikes of the time. The newly arrived Asians organised themselves skilfully with community support, with women in the vanguard' (NS, 25 September 2003). The ensuing victory was a sign that 'black power was coming to industry' (Ibid.).

The Bengali housing campaign, waged in London's East End, was perhaps the most significant campaign that the Collective became involved in during the mid-1970s. From around 1970, Dhondy and Sen had worked with the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London. The group was established in response to a series of skinhead attacks on Tower Hamlet's Mercers Estate. The attacks left several maimed and one dead. ARC-AEL organized small community defence squads, which quickly stamped out the skinhead 'Paki bashing.' Dhondy recalls the campaign thus: 'As soon as you post 10, 12, 15 very, very incensed Bengali youths with staffs and iron rods at the end of a street . . . you put an end to that, they don't come back' (Dhondy 2011). The Collective initiated the organization, the community provided the personnel. In addition to the defence squads, ARC-AEL organized a meeting of around 3,000 Bengalis in a cinema in Brick Lane. After some discussion, it was decided that Howe should address the meeting. Dhondy recalls: 'as Race Today representatives, Mala could have addressed it or I could have addressed it, but we decided Darcus should address it to show that a black guy could address 3,000 Asians, to say "we're here, it's a common struggle"' (Ibid.).

The collaboration with ARC-AEL established a point of contact between the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets and the Collective, which led to Howe's involvement in a bigger, more protracted campaign. The new campaign focused on housing. At first, the Collective fought the GLC's attempts to evict Bengali families from their homes. The evictions had been brought about by a local swindle. Dhondy recalls that a member of the Community Relations Council has conned a Bengali family out of £12,000. The family, parted with their money in the belief they were buying 16 Matlock Street, only to discover that the supposed title deeds were nothing more than a receipt of a donation to the 'Mohamed Social Services'. A month later, the GLC began eviction proceedings against the family, cutting off their gas and electricity (Ibid.).

By chance, Terry Fitzpatrick, a seasoned squatter, lived across the road from the disputed property. Fitzpatrick, a former squaddie, urged the occupants of 16 Matlock Street, and their neighbours who were experiencing similar difficulties, to squat. The decision to squat the Matlock Street houses created a movement. Between 1974 and 1976, hundreds of local Bengalis occupied vacant buildings. The former members of ARC-AEL took the lead, organizing vans, shifting furniture and setting up lookouts at the entrances to each street. The initiative came from the community. The Collective were invited to help organize the movement and began by sending lawyers to advise on the legalities of squatting.

Their primary role was to fend off the local police while local Bengalis moved into vacant houses. After all, there was nothing illegal about living in a vacant house, nor was it a crime to change the locks. Breaking in was an offence, but there was enough latitude in the law for Race Today lawyers to prevent police interference (Howe 2011d).

Fitzpatrick helped with the practicalities of securing the houses, as well as reconnecting gas, electricity and water. Dhondy recalls eager queues of Bengali families ready to move into the vacant houses. Soon all of the empty houses in Varden Street, Walden Street and Old Montague Street were housing Bengali families, who had collectively formed the country's largest squat. In a feature about the families who made up the backbone of the squatters movement, local journalist Mike Jempson described how 'simple mistakes, domestic responsibilities, unfamiliarity with housing procedures and exploitation are among the reasons' why hundreds of Bengalis had ended up squatting Varden Street. 'Their stories are often classic examples of how immigrant families get caught in a trap which leads them nowhere, purely as a result of being homeless, ineligible for council housing, and lacking the right information' (*East London Advertiser*, 8 September 1978). Squatting was the community's solution to these problems.

Dilapidated though the area was, the squatted houses had a value. Indeed, they were the property of the London Hospital who planned to sell two of the squatted roads, Varden Street and Nelson Street, to Tower Hamlets Council. However, the Council would only buy vacant properties. Consequently, the London Hospital and Council used a variety of tactics to remove the squatters. In February 1977, they cut off electricity supplies to many of the houses after London Hospital complained that supplies were being used illegally. Fitzpatrick and Race Today activists made a direct appeal to local unions, some of whose members lived in the squats. They responded with a threat of industrial action if supplies were not reconnected. Not wishing to face a united front of squatters and the local labour movement, the electricity supply was reconnected but not before the squatters were made to foot a £1,200 bill in connection charges (Ibid.).

The squatters movement emerged organically. Sen, Dhondy and Fitzpatrick helped to give it an institutional shape. BHAG, the Bengali Housing Action Group, was set up in February 1976. The first meeting drew together members of dozens of families from the streets which Fitzpatrick and activists from Race Today had helped squat (Forman 1989: 81). Declaring its intention to squat other empty property for families in need of housing, the organization soon took Pelham Buildings in the heart of Spitalfields. BHAG, an acronym chosen in part as it was the Bengali for 'tiger', united the Bengali Squatters under one

banner. In his study of the housing struggle in Spitalfields, Charlie Forman has estimated that at its peak, BHAG represented several hundred families, with a core of 150 families in the four main squats (1989: 82). Therefore, it controlled a large chunk of housing which had been placed under the Council's development programme and was in a powerful position to demand proper rehousing for its members. BHAG's programme was simple: it campaigned for the local families to be rehoused in safe areas, that is to say, areas where there was already a large Bengali community and therefore less likelihood of racist violence. To this end, Fitzpatrick and two Bengali activists drew up a list of 13 possible estates in which no reasonable offer would be refused. The list was agreed at a squatters' meeting.

The Hospital and Council initially refused to negotiate with BHAG. Rather, they gained an eviction order to force the Bengali families from their homes. This was a double blow for the families involved who had collectively spent more than £10,000 renovating the disputed properties. The folly of the council's action was highlighted by the *East London Advertiser* which noted how the once derelict streets had been given a new lease of life by the Bengali squatters (5 September 1978).

Together with BHAG, the Race Today Collective began to organize a picket of the Council buildings in protest. Howe proposed the picket as a show of strength that would take the issue directly to the seat of local government. However, there were tensions between the Collective and BHAG over the status of women inside the movement. Women from the Bengali community played no part in the meetings that directed the movement. This presented a problem, as the Collective was committed to sexual equality. Key members of the Collective were prepared to withdraw their support for the campaign if there was no change. Howe took the lead in defusing the tension. Howe's strategy was to avoid discussions of principle and appeal to the pragmatism of the community leaders. Female members of the Collective were playing a crucial role in the campaign. Sen, for example, was the Joint Secretary of BHAG, one of the movement's leading forces. Equally, Hassan and Lorine Burt were crucial to the Collective's contribution to the campaign. Sen, Hassan and Burt were determined to pull out if the Bengali women continued to be excluded. Howe's appeal to pragmatism triumphed, and local women were admitted to the meetings of BHAG and invited to the picket of the Council.

No longer able to ignore the squatters, the chairman of Tower Hamlets Housing Committee, Reg Beer, acceded to popular pressure and agreed to meet

a delegation from BHAG. A picket was organized to coincide with the meeting. Howe recalls that the Collective had assumed that the squatters would need to be given some guidance in the mechanics of protest. To this end, members of the Collective had produced the placards and were liaising with a group of Bengali youth when a large group of Bengali women arrived. Unprompted, the new arrivals carried out an audacious act of civil disobedience on the steps of the Council. En masse, the women lay down on the steps of the Council Offices blocking Beer's entry, forcing him to face the picket. The police were astonished and had no idea how to respond. One officer, assuming it was a preplanned tactic, approached Howe exclaiming, 'Oh fuck, what the fuck's going on?'. Howe had no explanation, he was just as shocked, but also elated that the women of the community had taken the lead in the protest (Howe 2011d).

As a result of the meeting, the legal action against the squatters was called off. The Tories who had won a majority on GLC in 1977 eventually declared a London-wide amnesty for all squatters and guaranteed those who registered with it would be rehoused (Forman 1989: 84). Forman argues that the GLC were in an impossible position due to the scale of BHAG's support and BHAG's tactical ability to wrong-foot the Council at every turn (Ibid., 83).

The BHAG campaign is emblematic of much that Race Today stood for. It was a campaign that emerged from the needs of the local community; the local community played the decisive role, with the Collective supporting their initiatives. Additionally, local, predominantly white, trades unions supported the action, without trying to dominate the campaign or co-opt the protest to their own ends. The result was victory. Dhondy recalls the end of the campaign in the following terms: 'The GLC moved in and said "Why are you listening to BHAG? We'll give you the tenancy of these places as Housing Associations for £6 a week." At this point we had a meeting and I said "We've won!" But Mala and Fitzpatrick said "No they're trying to undermine the revolution, the GLC is trying to buy these people out." I said, "These people don't want the end of the British state, *we* want the end of the British state, they want a house!"' (Dhondy 2011).

In 1978, the Collective formally set out the kernel of its ideological position:

Race Today is an organisation which has had as its guiding principle, that its content and practice be guided by the activity of the black working class – what it is saying and doing. That the working class will always be in the leadership of any struggle or movement.

(UC DHP Box VIII/1)

The statement reflected 4 years of practical activity and the lessons learnt from a series of successful campaigns.

Relationship with James

From 1982, the Collective began looking after the 81-year-old James. For 6 months in 1981, James moved into Dhondy's spare room at Stormont Road (Dhondy 2001: 174). Later, the pair moved to Hillsworth Road in Lewisham. Dhondy recalls: 'he came to stay because Darcus Howe asked me to put him up' (BBC 2002). Apparently James' marriage was over, and he was engaged in 'an affair of great culture and intellectual cunning!' (Ibid.). From Dhondy's spare room, he moved into a flat above the *Race Today* offices. While there, 'he was mostly content to stay in his room, almost always content to stay in bed' (Ibid.). More often than not, James had no need to travel as people made a point of seeking him out. His visitors included Viv Richards and Ian Botham. Howe was struck by the experience of witnessing 'first class cricketers looking at him with such awe' (Howe 2011).

The Collective supported him in numerous ways. In 1981, in collaboration with Allison and Busby, they organized his Eightieth Birthday Lectures. On a more prosaic level, Hassan remembers shopping and cooking for him. Apparently, he had a particular penchant for saltfish. Dhondy polished his shoes. Others would fetch wine, brandy and flowers when James was entertaining, and on these occasions Howe recalls, 'if anybody called, you were entitled to say "CLR James is dead" rather than interrupt him!' (BBC 2002).

After James moved into the flat on Railton Road, the relationship was more immediate. Speaking in 1992, Howe described the relationship between the Collective and James in the following terms:

... he lived with us, the small organisation, for the last ten years of he life. He actually physically lived with us. He lived upstairs above the offices. By and large, people use the word "consultant" these days – I don't think it means anything, but we had this relationship with him, he was a grand old man, suitably respected, who intervened and worked with us over ten years.

(ICA 1992)

Dhondy characterizes Howe's relationship with James as that of the 'respectful nephew ... with C. L. R. it was respect, it was respect and reading, it was always waiting to see what James would say'. Harry Goulbourne, who had known

Figure 3 C. L. R. James and Darcus Howe share a platform during James' Eightieth Birthday Lectures, Kingsway Princeton College, Camden, London, 1981.

Howe since the early 1970s, recalls spending a number of evenings at the *Race Today* offices, sometimes talking to Howe, sometimes talking with James. 'It was wonderful spending evenings there, just sitting around and chatting. It was a part of a great Trinidadian tradition – liming' (Goulbourne 2012). Goulbourne recalls Howe's relationship with James as one of 'nephew and protector. Darcus provided CLR with care, he made sure that visitors didn't exhaust the old man, and one got the impression that he felt very privileged to be in that position, to take care of him in the last leg of his life. There is a caring side to Darcus, in spite of his bravado, he's a caring person' (Ibid.).

As far as Dhondy was concerned, 'CLR was the ideological guide for *Race Today*' (Dhondy 2011). James' influence was evident in the Collective's attitude to Western culture. Rather than rejecting it, as the nationalists had done, 'the Collective picked up from C. L. R. James that the western intellectual tradition has to be respected and built upon – that is absolutely the basis of *Race Today*, there is no way that that can be gainsaid' (Ibid.). For Linton Kwesi Johnson too, the Collective was a distinctively Jamesian group, 'we followed Jamesian ideas, based on the principle that every cook can and *should* govern. We were a small organisation that was having a big impact – that small meant big' (Johnson 2011).

James' relationship with *Race Today* dated back to the earliest days of Howe's involvement with the magazine. James travelled widely during the 1970s, keeping in touch with Howe through a series of letters that are preserved at Columbia University. James' correspondence clearly indicates

that he thought highly of the journal. Writing from Washington in 1976, James commented:

I continue to receive with great satisfaction, your wholly admirable paper *Race Today*. I am particularly anxious to hear what you have to say about the events which took place between our people celebrating carnival and the police. . . . I badly want to hear what happened and what is happening from a dependable source.

(UC DHP Box I/3)

On another occasion, on 16 March 1988, James praised Howe's prose:

I have two letters to write to you but this must be the first. It is about your book, "The Struggle of Asian Workers in Britain." I have talked to you about it but I want to put what I think in writing. It is a masterpiece in the use of the English language."

(Ibid.)

The correspondence is indicative of the scope of James' interest in *Race Today*. Sometimes, Howe's letters chased James' contributions, commissioned articles or reported on his progress setting up James' lecture tours. The two men discussed events in the Caribbean in Britain and in Poland. In one exchange, they considered the definition of fascism, agreeing that the term is too often used loosely as a synonym for dictatorship; on another, James sent a donation to the George Lindo Campaign (Ibid.).

Race Today covered James' writings and lectures extensively. The November 1980 edition, for example, reviewed James' *Spheres of Existence* and *Notes on Dialectics*, the next issue advertised his Eightieth Birthday Lectures; the magazine reproduced many of James' lectures, and from 1983, James had his own column 'Cricket Notes'.

There were disagreements too, most notably over the issue of black police officers. The row started with Howe's December 1975 editorial. Entitled 'Blacks in the Police Force', the piece critiqued a police recruitment drive aimed at the black working class. In essence, Howe argued that the police were following the pattern of all major British employers, seeking black workers for positions that white workers were increasingly reluctant to fill. He also claimed that the initiative was a bid to reassert control of black neighbourhoods. In the light of this analysis, Howe argued that black people should stay out of the force and 'make common cause' with the 'growing movement against police harassment and corruption in the white community' (RT, 1975: 266).

James took issue with this analysis. Dhondy remembers that Howe and James were at loggerheads over the editorial. Dhondy recalls it thus: 'James said, "You are being bloody minded. You fellows man, I tell you, you have to be in every institution of the British state. How can you tell blacks not to join where they ought to be?" And Darcus would get angry.' Howe went ahead and published. James responded with a letter that opened the next issue of *Race Today*. Whatever went on behind the scenes, within the pages of *Race Today*, dispute was handled with great tact. James' letter began by complimenting Howe's 'excellent editorial', while Howe ensured that James' letter got the whole of the magazine's first page (*RT*, 1976: 2). In essence, James' letter argued that the police must become a more representative institution. Consequently, he did not want the recruitment drive 'dismissed or attacked'. At the same time, he argued that black people should not rush into the force unless the police committed itself to recruiting and promoting black people on equal terms with white people; and unless the judiciary too became more representative of the community at large. Throughout the piece, James suggested that black officers should be prepared to play a progressive role in the force; they should, he argued, receive special training commensurate with their role as representative of a minority community. Moreover, he argued that black officers could well win back respect of the community as a whole for the force. In the end, Dhondy recalls, 'Darcus acknowledged that James was right!' (Dhondy 2011). Howe's change of mind was evident, in 1986, in the article 'Blacks in Blue: Black Police Officers Speak', which presented extended interviews with three black officers reminiscent of the journal's early pieces with Asian workers. Later in his journalistic career, writing for the *New Statesman*, Howe took on James' role, urging the Black Police Association to drop their opposition to a plan to recruit police officers directly from the Caribbean (*NS*, 17 July 2002).

Putting out the magazine

Howe was no stranger to radical publishing. He had set up and run the short-lived *Black Dimension*, worked on the editorial team of the *Vanguard* and contributed to *Freedom News*. But for Howe, *Race Today* was something different. He was determined to leave behind the rhetorical tropes that had been integral to the first phase of Black Power. Howe's emphasis was on clarity of expression, in the belief that the facts would speak for themselves. Therefore,

under Howe's editorship, there would be 'no denigration of the police as "pigs"', which had been part of the style of magazines such as the *Hustler* (Howe 2011d). In this sense, Howe's editorial approach was a continuation of his approach in the Mangrove trial, an approach that had been consciously 'disciplined by figures and facts' (Ibid.). Howe's experience was supported by discussions with James focusing on E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Reading Thompson with James persuaded Howe that English racism 'had to be fought in the style and manner of the English dissenting tradition' (UC DHP Box 9/2). This tradition stood in stark contrast to the mainstream radicalism of the day which Howe characterizes as 'leftist ideological anti-racism' (Howe 2011d). Howe was heading in the direction that James had mapped out in his 'Black Power' address of 1968, seeing Black Power as the latest phase of a universal radical tradition. Howe had never intended the magazine to have a mass circulation; rather, he wanted to keep the spotlight on racism. For Trevor Phillips, this was *Race Today's* greatest achievement; it kept the issue of racism on the map and made sure that the government and media were never able to ignore it (Phillips 2010).

Hassan, who took over as deputy editor after the break with the IRR, recalls: 'usually the stories presented themselves to us, because of what was going on. We never had to scabble around for stories' (Hassan 2011). Members of the Collective worked as 'in house writers'. Following a £250,000 grant from the GLC, the typesetting, lay-out and design of the magazine were also done in-house. Julian Stapleton, Lorine Burt's boyfriend, helped with the production of the magazine on a voluntary basis (Ibid.). Johnson, who acted as poetry editor and latterly arts editor, describes his role as 'sifting through submissions that came in, finding the appropriate reviewer for the appropriate book' (Ibid.). During 1977, campaigning took precedence over magazine production and therefore some of the issues had to be shelved (UC DHP Box VIII/1).

In addition to the magazine, *Race Today* Publications put out a series of pamphlets including Selma James' *Race, Sex and Class* (1975), C. L. R. James' *Walter Rodney and the Question of Power* (1981), Dhondy's *Black Explosion in British Schools* (1982) as well as Johnson's poetry such as *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974) and *Inglan is a Bitch* (1981); latter publications included a photographic history of black people in Britain from Windrush to the New Cross Massacre, compiled by Hassan and Hilliman, edited by Trevor Esward entitled *The Arrivants*. There were *Race Today* Bulletins too, such as the 1976 *Teacher's Action* which dealt with the Black Parents Movement; the 1977 special

Figure 4 Howe and Leila Hassan, editor and deputy editor at the *Race Today* Offices, Shakespeare Road, during the 1980s.

edition, *The Road make to walk in Carnival Day*; and the 1979 special issues on the Grenada Revolution and the Terror in Guyana.

As the magazine developed, regular features included 'Asian Diary' and 'Caribbean Diary', which were dedicated to reporting the ongoing struggle in the former colonies. John La Rose wrote an occasional column. Howe and the Collective kept in regular contact with radicals in the Caribbean, particularly Tim Hector, and from time to time, they invited activists from the Caribbean to deliver keynote addresses, such as those given to the March 1983 conference on 'The Social Crisis in Trinidad and Tobago'. The meeting was organized jointly by the Black Parents Movement, the Black Youth Movement and the Race Today Collective.

Basement Sessions

In addition to putting out the paper and aiding campaigns, the Collective was involved in self-education through meetings that became known as 'Basement Sessions'. These events were designed, in Howe's words, 'not to build anything, but to discuss the issues of the day'. Sometimes, they were reading groups. Indeed, an early set of sessions was devoted to James' *Nkrumah and the Ghana revolution* (1977). The book is interesting, not least, because James linked the struggle for independence in Africa with the attitudes of the British working class. The book opens with the argument that while Nkrumah and his supporters played the primary role in dismantling colonialism in Ghana, he was helped by the collapse in support for imperialism among the British working class (James 1977: 1). James' discussion of the relationship between the anti-colonial movement and the working-class movement was a crucial part of the ideological education that Howe spearheaded at the Race Today Collective. On other occasions, the Basement Sessions built bridges with other communities involved in their own acts of resistance. In 1983, to take one example, at Hassan's instigation, the Collective paid for the wives of striking coal miners to come to London and tell their stories (Hassan 2011). During the 1983 and 1984 volumes of *Race Today*, some of the themes discussed at the sessions were written up for *Race Today*. The July/August edition brought these threads together by opening its pages to NUM activist Ron Browne who articulated the miner's case against the Thatcher government.

Annual weekends away continued the work that went on at the Basement Sessions. The weekends took place in a country house, owned by the World Council of Churches, usually used for spiritual retreats. Johnson recalls them as 'fun, they were for bonding, but they were also for ideological discussion' (Johnson 2011). Monopoly and card games were a feature of the Collective's conferences, with Howe always determined to come out on top. It was at one of these occasions that Howe summed up the general feeling, arguing that police action in Brixton was pushing the local black community to the brink of a social explosion. This was no act of clairvoyance. Hassan points out that every edition of the journal had stories about fights with the police and arrests precipitated by the stop and search campaigns (Hassan 2011). Nonetheless, it was an important moment as Howe situated the growing tension within the tradition of Caribbean rebellion and, in so doing, helped prepare the Collective for the coming insurrection.

Beyond London

James advised Howe to get to know Britain, to avoid the mistake of thinking that the whole country was merely an extension of London. Taking James at his word, Howe made this part of his approach to *Race Today* when possible, travelling across the country to participate in campaigns outside of the capital.

One of Howe's ongoing contacts was Leeds-based radical and academic Max Farrar. By the mid-1970s, Howe argues, there was a growing 'educated white radicalism' independent of the major Trotskyite groups and willing to work with Howe and the Collective. Farrar's first encounter with Howe was through *Race Today*. Together with Vi Hendrickson and Annette Francis, Farrar was involved in the production of the *Chapletown News*, a campaigning news-sheet that had been radicalized in the wake of the trial of a number of young black people who were accused of riot during the 1976 Bonfire Night celebrations. On occasion, Farrar promoted stories from the *Chapletown News* to *Race Today*. In April 1977, while fighting racist police in the West Yorkshire force, Howe put Farrar and the Collective around *Chapletown News* in touch with the Bradford Black Collective (UC DHP Box VIII/1). Ali Hussein's 1978 history of the Bradford Black Collective argues that the group emerged in 1976 after conflict between the police and a group of young black people determined to frustrate a National Front rally. This experience, Hussein argues, 'crystallized the fundamental conflicts between Bradford blacks, the state and other hostile forces, and posed the question of independent black organisation' (Ibid.). The nascent Bradford Black Collective soon established links with the Race Today Collective. Hussein argues that this link was crucial to the Collective's political development as it led to the emergence of a coherent group with a clear focus on 'the struggle against the state. . . . This link was personified in Darcus Howe. During his many visits to Bradford we met to review the progress of the Campaign. He made suggestions regarding issues of the Campaign and related his experience in the BPM [Black Parent's Movement] struggles' (Ibid.).

Hussein's narrative accords Howe a crucial role in countering attempts by the white left to co-opt black radicals into existing organizations. Farrar explains the 'fraught relationship' between black radicalism and the traditional white left thus: 'We weren't happy with the slogan "Black and white unite and fight"', he explains:

There was an incipient racism in the white left. It was never verbalised. There was a sort of assumption that black people would join the white left and basically toe the

party line. There was no recognition at all that black and Asian people might have something very specific to contribute, coming out of their experience, that might change the nature of these white left-wing organisations.

(Ibid.)

Big Flame was one predominantly white radical group which bucked the trend. Farrar, and some of the other members, had been exposed to the work of James and recognized the importance of black autonomy. Consequently, there was the scope for some kind of collaboration between Big Flame and the Race Today Collective. Farrar acted as the liaison between the two groups. Farrar worked with Howe on several campaigns. The first was in support of the Imperial Typewriters strike: 'Darcus asked me to organise a picket in Leeds against a business who were supplying Imperial Typewriters in Leeds. We had a demo and a picket and made a lot of noise, and then it turned out we were at the wrong place! They were supplying Olivetti or something' (Farrar 2011). Collaborations over the Bradford Twelve and George Lindo campaign were much more successful. Howe describes his role in the Bradford Twelve campaign thus:

... a group of young Asians, hearing that Bradford would be invaded by the National Front, stashed a few petrol bombs in readiness for the attack.

Twelve of them were arrested and charged with conspiracy to cause explosions, I was designated by Race Today to assist in their defence. ... The Asian youths convinced a white jury to find them not guilty on the grounds of self-defence.

(NS, 6 June 2001)

Farrar remembers Howe as 'a great speaker and a great thinker ... one of the few significant leading figures in British radical and revolutionary politics in the seventies and the eighties' (Farrar 2011).

Howe and the Collective attempted to create a forum in which these disparate groups could co-operate, organizing the Race Today Bradford Black Conference which took place on the weekend of 22 April 1978. Resolutions put forward ahead of the Conference by Hassan state the purpose of the meeting was to ensure that Race Today could 'assist the independent working class activity and organisations against the attempt to re-colonise us' (UC DHP Box VIII/1). The links forged with the Bradford Black Collective, the Collective around *Chapletown News* and smaller groups in Sheffield and the Manchester Black Parents Movement, founded by Gus John in 1978, would prove crucial to Howe's organization of the Black People's Day of Action following the New Cross Fire.

Race Today also kept a constant eye on the politics of Northern Ireland. The magazine reported the Republican struggle as part of its wider coverage of anti-colonial movements. Indeed, in 1980, Howe argued that 'the Irish struggle will in time be the source through which all social relations in Britain are transformed' (*RTR*, 1980: 51). For this reason, it came to the attention of leaders of Sinn Féin and the IRA. As a result, Bobby Sands submitted a short story 'Black Beard in Profile' which Howe published as part of the 1981 *Race Today Review*. 'It had very little literary merit', Howe recalls, but the submission came in the midst of Sands' hunger strike. Moved by compassion for the starving inmate, Howe published the piece. It was one article among many, but its publication clearly meant something for the Republican Movement, for when Ken Livingstone invited Gerry Adams to London in July 1983, Adams requested a meeting with Howe.

Howe recalls that the *Race Today* offices were circled by a police helicopter for the duration of Adam's visit. The two men spoke at length. Adam's physical presence made a deep impact on Howe. 'He did not smile once. To appropriate a Dickensian phrase, he was "so cold and hard". Icy even. He spoke literally without a blink. His stare was razor sharp.' Howe's abiding impression was of a man who had been forced to inhabit a 'dark grim dungeon' (*Evening Standard*, 9 September 1994).

From 1974 to 1988, *Race Today* combined active support for grass-roots protest with powerful journalism. The magazine remained true to its initial commitment to focus on black people as protagonists rather than victims. In accordance with James' vision of a radical publication, it gave space for people to express themselves in their own terms while also acting as a collective memory – situating diverse struggles within a history of the black community in Britain.¹

Note

1 *Race Today's* commitment to the arts is considered in Chapter 16.