Bunce, Robin, and Paul Field. "Carnival: Revolutionaries Don't Wear Glitter." *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 217–224. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544407.ch-016>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:04 UTC.

Copyright © Robin Bunce and Paul Field 2014. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Carnival: Revolutionaries Don't Wear Glitter

For Howe, politics and culture are intimately bound together; his essential insight was that political movements and cultural movements emerge hand in hand. Howe tackled the subject in the pages of *Race Today*. Indeed, the magazine reflected Howe's conception and therefore, as the 1980s progressed, *Race Today* became increasingly oriented towards black cultural movements. Under the direction of Akua Rugg, *Race Today's* in-house literary critic, the magazine gained sections such as 'Poet's Corner', and 'Creation for liberation', a regular section which covered music, theatre, films and books. The cultural orientation of the magazine was given further prominence from 1980 with publication of an annual *Race Today Review*. The first *Review* contained 'a short story and poems' as well as reviews of 'political tracts, novels, the work of poets, musicians, playwrights and film makers' (*RTR*, 1980: 51). Howe introduced the work that the *Review* contained as a small taste of the 'creative activities which flow from the terrain on which we do political battle', work that was 'forged in the heat of confrontation between the new society in the making and its suffocating and increasingly murderous opposite' (*Ibid.*). Howe's intuitions about the relationship between politics and culture chimed with those of James. The second *Race Today Review* contained James' essay 'I am a poet', which championed the work of Ntozake Shange. Drawing inspiration from the 1981 Polish Spring, James argued that artistic expression in the modern world would either reflect the desire for freedom embodied in Solidarity or imperatives of the 'regimes that are described by Solzhenitsyn in his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*' (*RTR*, 1981: 2). James praised Shange's work precisely because she wrote about her own experience, 'her own world' rather than serving the ideological vision of the state.

Howe returned to the topic of culture and politics in his 1981 'Introduction' to the *Race Today Review*. The essay addresses the conditions necessary to a

flourishing cultural scene. Howe argued that artistic expression must be 'nurtured'.

... artistic creativity is fed and stimulated in an ambience which generates work of the highest quality. It requires vibrant, social institutions in which the works are concentrated and made available to those who strive to create it.

(*RTR*, 1981: 3)

However, Britain in 1981 was characterized by cultural bankruptcy and therefore black artists should look to 'durable institutions' within the black community such as 'New Beacon Books, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications and Race Today Publications' which 'continue to foster the ambience' in which artistry could flourish (*Ibid.*). Rugg's 'Introduction' to the 1984 *Race Today Review* indicates that Howe's notion of cultural 'nurture' was central to her editorial view of literature. 'Artists', she argued, 'need to be nurtured by a receptive and critical audience' in order for their work to mature. Therefore, the 'publishing houses, bookshops, art galleries, theatres and public festivals' that had emerged as part of the 'struggles waged consistently over the years by blacks' were crucial to the black cultural scene (*RTR*, 1984: 3).

Creation for Liberation

Creation for Liberation was one of a number of cultural institutions that thrived during the 1980s to nurture black artists. Established in 1975, the small group of artists and organizers set out the organization's origins and purpose thus:

Creation for Liberation was born out of the struggles the black community is engaged in for freedom. There is a cultural dimension to these struggles reflected in many areas of the arts, be it music, literature, the fine arts, the performing arts, film or sport. The cultural expression not only draws from the rich and powerful Asian, African and Caribbean heritage but also from the British and European tradition.

(*RTR*, 1988: 3)

To this end, the organization set up cultural events, organized discussions and published leaflets and books recording and promoting black talent. In practice, Creation for Liberation was responsible for a series of annual Open Exhibitions, starting in 1982, which showcased the work of black visual artists. The Greater London Arts Council and Lambeth Borough Council provided some assistance,

but the greater part of the support came from the community itself who gave their time and skills as curators, electricians, carpenters and joiners, painters and decorators to build the show from scratch.

Chila Burnam, who was involved in the 1987 Open Exhibition, described the Open Exhibition as 'dead important because it's the only exhibition by black artists, for black artists' (*BF*, 24 October 1987). Aubrey Williams, the elder statesman of black British art world at the time, argued that the importance of the Exhibitions lay in the fact that it gave young black artists the freedom to 'do their own thing. We're having a do in our own back yard, we're producing our own thing, for our own people . . . it gives an avenue for pure unfettered black expression' (*Ibid.*). Howe saw things very much the same way. Howe participated in the fourth Open Exhibition of 1987 by hosting a seminar on black aesthetics, a conversation with Williams about black film and painting as well as the experience of up-and-coming black artists in the College system (UC DHP Box VIII/9). In addition to the visual arts, Creation for Liberation did much to nurture black poets, including Maya Angelou, Michael Smith, Grace Nichols, Lorna Goodison and Marc Matthews (*RTR*, 1988: 12). Indeed, the group were responsible for Ntozake Shange and Jean 'Binta' Breeze's 1988 national tour (*Ibid.*). By 1990, with ticket receipts and various forms of sponsorship, Creation for Liberation was generating revenues in excess of £39,000 (UC DHP Box VIII/3).

Carnival

Carnival is a festival born out of the socially committed from the Caribbean working class – a festival of the people, by the people, for the people.

Darcus Howe, 11 August 2003 (*NS*, 11 August 2003)

Howe's most significant cultural contribution came through carnival, an art form in which he had been immersed since his youth as a member of Renegades Steelband in Port-of-Spain. Steelband music is in Howe's blood, so from the moment the Notting Hill Carnival was first mooted in 1965, he became a keen participant who 'played the iron' and shared his knowledge of the Trinidadian pan movement with other West Indians and whites attracted by the event (Howe 2011i). The sheer energy and vivacity of the annual celebration attracted thousands of new revellers each year so that by the early 1970s it had already developed into Britain's biggest annual open air festival.

It was in the wake of the violent confrontation between police and black youth which occurred at the 1976 Carnival, when police calls for the Carnival to be banned or relocated reached their height, that Howe emerged as a national spokesman for the Carnival and its organizing committee's first elected chair. At the same time, Howe and the Race Today Collective formed their own masquerade band or 'mas' with the support of hundreds of local youth in Brixton. Via the mas, known as Race Today Mangrove Renegade Band, they brought their radical politics to the streets of Notting Hill with themed floats and costumes. With 'Forces of Victory' in 1977, a tribute to insurgent southern African national liberation movements; 'Viva Zapata' in 1978, an appreciation of the Mexican revolutionary's life, and 'Feast of the Barbarian' in 1979, celebrating Britain's own ancient tradition of native resistance against foreign conquest, the mas won Best Costume for three consecutive years. At the same time, Howe was helping to reconstitute the Carnival's organizing committee on a democratic basis while also articulating a clear and radical vision of what Carnival was and should be. In his study, *Masquerade Politics*, Abner Cohen notes of Howe's impact, that Carnival 'became politically and culturally radical under his influence and he left an enduring mark on its structure' (1993: 110).

The appearance of large numbers of black youth at the 1975 Carnival, the tenth anniversary of the festival, represented a turning point in its history. Attracted

Figure 7 Howe leading the masqueraders during the Notting Hill Carnival, August 1978.

by large stationary discos under A40 flyover and Capital Radio's decision to promote the event, thousands of young black people participated in a way they had not done before, swelling the number of revellers to around 250,000. Inevitably, in such a crowded gathering, some petty crimes occurred such as pick pocketing and camera snatching. Nonetheless, as Howe later pointed out, no more pockets were picked in Notting Hill over Carnival than in Oxford Street during any day in the festive period (Howe 1978: 7). In the aftermath of the Carnival, Police Commander Patterson, who was charged with policing of the 1976 Carnival, openly identified with and promoted the aims of a petition being organized by a small section of the local white community to have the Notting Hill Carnival relocated to White City Stadium or Battersea Park. Patterson claimed that the Carnival 'had outgrown itself' and that if it wasn't relocated police numbers would increase from 60 in 1975 to several hundred at the coming 1976 Carnival. Through the pages of *Race Today*, Howe campaigned to protect the very nature of Carnival as a Notting Hill street festival, winning the support of the organizing committee and its chairman Selwyn Baptiste. Howe insisted there could be no compromise on location, which had been chosen in 1965, as it 'was closest to liberated territory', that is to say, where local West Indians had fought off the racists in 1958 and had put up major resistance to police brutality ever since. Howe's 1976 campaign succeeded in keeping Carnival in Notting Hill but the police continued to threaten a massive increase in their presence.

In a hardening of police tactics from the previous years, Patterson also blocked the organizers' application to obtain a liquor licence for the sale of beer by street vendors. This move gave his officers, quickly branded the 'Pale Ale Brigade', the power to pull down and disrupt numerous stalls which lined the Carnival's route. Two weeks before the 1976 August Bank Holiday, BBC interviewed members of *Race Today*. Describing the mounting tension between police and West Indian community as 'pretty explosive', they warned the police that 'if anything happened after all we have said, written, publicised, talked officially, if anything happened that's their fault' (*RT*, July 1977: 9).

With the scene set for a confrontation, Patterson deployed 20 times more officers, in total more than 1,200, to police the 1976 Carnival than had been deployed the year previously. Newspaper and eyewitness reports would later describe the appalling violence used by police as they tried to arrest a small group they suspected of pickpocketing at the corner of Acklam Road and Blagrove Road, thereby prompting a full-scale riot (*Daily Mirror*, 1 September 1976). Hassan remembers that when the fighting broke out, hundreds of police

reinforcements which had been stationed in green and blue buses in adjoining streets joined the street battle. Not wanting the young children who were with them, including Howe's 10-year-old daughter Tamara, to witness the violence, Frank Crichlow opened the Mangrove Restaurant so they could take refuge from the fighting raging outside. The impromptu plan was thrown into disarray when dozens of riot police stormed the Mangrove without reason, causing its occupants to flee to the basement. After 4 solid hours of fighting, 325 police were reported injured and 60 people were arrested and charged in what was one of the worst riots in London for 25 years (*RT*, July 1977: 11).

In the face of renewed calls from police and politicians for the Carnival to be banned, the Collective issued an open letter to the Carnival Development Committee (CDC) in September 1976, demanding that its next general meeting be opened to all mas men and women, steelbands' men and women, sounds' men and women and interested individuals with a record of positive contribution to the Carnival. It called for the general meeting to elect the Development Committee as their public face, because 'the leadership of Carnival is not a monarchy to be passed on from one elite to the next' (*RT*, July 1977: 18). The Collective's programme for reform was presented to the CDC in stark terms. For the Carnival to survive the threat to its future, it must develop and weld the organizational resources which already shaped the large mas bands, the steelbands, the preparation of stallholders, the local West Indian businesses and individuals with an immediate interest in the Carnival. The case for reform was compelling. In April 1977, Howe became the first democratically elected chairman of the CDC. During his period in office, Howe introduced transparent accounting practices for funds raised and donated for the Carnival, won Arts Council recognition and funding for the Carnival after picketing its meetings and succeeded in opening a constructive dialogue over policing with senior officers in the Met who rejected Patterson's aggressive tactics (Howe 2011i).

Not everyone approved of Howe's new role in the CDC. A rival Carnival and Arts Committee, whose support came from four local community associations without any backing from the steel and mas bands, argued after the 1976 riot that the Carnival should become an explicitly political event. It also called on the Carnival to fully exploit its commercial potential to raise money and create jobs for the local community. Cecil Gutzmore, of Black People's Information Centre, has since criticized the CDC and Howe for establishing a power base among the Steelbands and Massbands on the grounds that such people tended to be 'culturalists' and 'apolitical' (Gutzmore 1993: 227). Howe saw things differently.

He considered any overt, instrumental use of the event for political purposes misconceived. The fact that hundreds of thousands of people came to Notting Hill in the face of opposition from police and authorities was itself a major political event. Howe also resisted attempts to commercialize the Carnival and insisted that grants like that offered by the Arts Council should have no strings attached to them in order to avoid the Carnival from becoming a pecuniary spectacle tied to the interests of the state or big business and thereby nullifying it as a form of cultural rebellion. As Cohen has observed, Howe appreciated the political potential of the Carnival, though he insisted that the celebration was essentially a cultural, artistic event and should be cultivated as such, not only to deny the authorities the excuse to ban it, but also, paradoxically, to make it more politically efficacious (1993: 111).

The Collective's own revolutionary politics were expressed through their own masquerade band with Howe playing the part of Emiliano Zapata one year and Cossack Barbarian Taras Bulba, in 'Feast of the Barbarians', the next. The first time they entered the Carnival and won Best Costume was in 1977 for Forces of Victory celebrating anti-colonial revolutions in Mozambique and Angola. Hassan recalls that the centre piece of their float was a tank which Loretta had built out of polystyrene around the shell of a car. Its realism was such that when a local resident saw the tank with a Renegade from East Driver, Dr Rat, standing on top, she exclaimed 'fucking hell they've got a tank' (Howe 2011i).

Hassan recalls that their mas refused to wear glitter, 'as revolutionaries we wore flat colours, we wanted to show that you could do mas with a revolutionary theme without all the glitter and pomp of the Trinidadian Carnival' (Hassan 2011). Lyn Richards, a white member of IRR staff and mas camp organizer, acted as seamstress, and Una Howe was, by all accounts, a brilliant costume designer. Howe sums up the experience of the Carnival thus:

The police thought it was a conspiracy and wanted to constrain us within the rigour of some notion of "Englishness". What they found out was that English people liked to dance as much as West Indians. They came to realise that you could not stop hundreds of thousands of people enjoying themselves. To this day it was all spontaneous. Whites began to be attracted in large numbers. There was a beautiful synchronisation of race. Carnival transcended race.

(Howe 2011i)