Bunce, Robin, and Paul Field. "'Darcus Howe is not a Comedian'." *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 59–70. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544407.ch-005>>.

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‘Darcus Howe is not a Comedian’

October 1968 was decision time. Howe was faced with a choice; either pursue academic study at York or join James at the Congress of Black Writers. Although the Congress was hosted at McGill University in Montreal, this was no academic affair. Nor, despite the title, was it ostensibly a literary event. The subtitle of the Congress, ‘Towards the Second Emancipation. The Dynamics of Black Liberation’, is undoubtedly more helpful in understanding the character of the occasion (Walmsley 1992: 227). Howe simply describes it as an ‘international Black Power congress’ (Howe 2011b). The Congress was organized by the Conference Committee on West Indian Affairs (CCWIA), whose core consisted of Alfie Roberts, Rosie Douglas, Ann Cools, Wally Look Lai and Raymond Watts – a group who were clearly influenced by James (Austin 2001: 61).

It is difficult at this distance to reconstruct how long Howe deliberated, but in the final analysis, he chose to attend the Congress. There was, of course, the issue of financing a trip to Canada. Howe’s solution was to sell his house in Crouch Hill, North London. The house had belonged to his first wife’s grandmother, and Howe admits that its sale ‘disrupted the rhythm of her life for a time’ (Howe 2011b).

The Congress of Black Writers

The Congress of Black Writers took place between 11 and 14 October. The Congress was the culmination of a series of events organized by the CCWIA and perhaps the seminal event for the international Black Power movement. Organized in the memory of King and Malcolm X, it attracted around 1,600 delegates as well as many speakers of international stature from the world of Black Power. Speakers who addressed the ballroom of the University Union

included James, Walter Rodney, James Foreman and Stokely Carmichael (Austin 2007: 523). Douglas recalls the tenor of the conference thus:

An attempt was made to analyse our history, our perspective: from the political economy of slavery to the psychology of subjection: from the post 1945 events in the black world and the world in general to the contemporary Black Power Movement, particularly as it related to the third world struggle against imperialism.

(Tulloch 1975: 136)

Howe recollects the Congress thus:

They had some of the most brilliant speakers at that conference: Walter Rodney, Bobby Hill, Bobby used to bounce on two feet like Fidel Castro! Tim Hector . . . I was terrified, I thought "I'm among the big guns now". CLR mastered it. Carmichael graciously would accept that.

(Howe 2011b)

There were also opportunities for lesser-known figures to speak, and Howe seized the occasion to address the Congress. 'I talked about what I knew, when my mother talked about moving I joined Renegades/Lawbreakers. . . . I was talking about, concerned about, that class in the Caribbean, the unemployed youth and the use of the state against them. And cracking jokes too.' Bukka Rennie, a student at Sir George Williams University in the late 1960s and a delegate at the Congress, recalls Howe's contribution as one of the highlights of the event:

. . . Darcus spoke about the West Indies Federation or the mash up of the Federation [1958–1962]. He talked about how he was a member of an institution that was born in Trinidad that outlasted the Federation. He was talking about Renegades—Renegades Steel Band. [Laughter]

(*Trinidad and Tobago Review*, 2010)

Howe's humorous take on Caribbean politics provoked a good deal of hilarity. The comedy, Howe recalls, was a testament to his nerves. The Congress was a big arena, and he was surrounded by figures known across the world. Many, like Carmichael, were at the height of their powers. But Howe's speech had a serious idea at its core. Rodney would not give his lecture on 'groundings' until the Congress was over, but this notion of 'groundings' was the essence of what Howe was describing. Quite independently, it seems, Howe had reached

the same conclusions: that an intellectual should learn from and spend time in the community from which they are drawn. Fearing that Howe's point would be lost in the mirth, James advised the assembly at the plenary session to carefully consider Howe's words. 'Darcus Howe,' he remarked 'is not a comedian' (Howe 2011b).

The Congress inspired the radicals in attendance to new feats. Almost immediately, black students took on the university authorities on the campuses of McGill University and Sir George Williams University. The final edition of the *Black Eagle*, which contains a brief description of the conference, also noted that once the Congress was over, Rosie Douglas, accompanied by two American Panthers, travelled to Nova Scotia to speak at a meeting of the local black community, only to be arrested for inciting riot (GPI JOU 35/4, 8). Rennie goes further and draws a direct line from the Congress to the Black Power Revolution in Trinidad in 1970.

The Congress wrapped up on 14 October. Howe stayed on. Rodney too remained in Canada after the Congress. In Rodney's case, his presence in Canada was the result of the Jamaican government who, fearing Rodney's influence among local black radicals, banned him from returning to his post at the University of the West Indies (UWI) on the day after the conclusion of the Congress (Small 1969: iv). The ban was counterproductive, precipitating the 'Rodney Riots'. Rodney continued to lecture, and on 18 October, he gave the talk which is now referred to as the 'The Groundings with my Brothers' (Ibid., viii). Howe was present at the lecture. As already noted, the idea of groundings was not new to him, but the lecture did draw out its political significance.

Sojourn with SNCC

Howe's decision to go to Canada rather than York was crucial, for it was the point at which he made radical politics his vocation. The seriousness of his commitment is evident from his decision to immerse himself in political action almost as soon as the Congress was over. The Congress was an excellent opportunity to meet black radicals from across the world. In fact, it was through the Congress that Howe met several members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who invited him to join them in New York. Eager to work alongside some of Black Power's leading exponents, he accepted the invitation, crossing the Canadian border clandestinely. For

two and a half months, he lived in America, and for most of that time, he was based in Harlem, a largely black neighbourhood in Upper Manhattan. Howe's stay in New York coincided with the final phase of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville campaign, a seminal campaign which was on the cutting edge of Black Power politics in America. Working with SNCC exposed Howe to the debates going on within the American Black Power movement, gave him direct experience of SNCC's campaign methods and allowed him to spend time with H. Rap Brown, SNCC's final chairman.

As with all campaigns, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville campaign had a backstory. The issue of race and education in New York had been reawakened in the mid-1950s. The Supreme Court's ruling in the Brown Case effectively tore up the legal foundation of segregation, as well as demanding the integration of all schools across America. The liberals on New York's Board of Education embraced the ruling, but the way forward was unclear. Technically, the Brown Case dealt with formal segregation, that is to say, segregation rooted in 'Jim Crow' laws. In New York, things were different. The segregation in education arose from economic inequalities. Poorer neighbourhoods were predominantly black, more affluent areas almost exclusively white, and this division was reflected in the schools.

By 1966, a hard-fought campaign by Parents and Taxpayers (PAT) had forced the local Education Board to drop its policy of managed integration. The failure of the integration initiative coincided with a new kind of black radicalism. Carmichael was at the forefront of the new thinking. In terms of education, he was concerned to refocus the discussion, taking the emphasis off integration. For too long, he argued, people had conflated integrating education and improving education for black children. This was a problem for two reasons. First, integration did not necessarily lead to improved education for black children. Secondly, integration, as it had traditionally been conceived, was always on white terms, predicated on the notion that there was nothing of value in the black community (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967: 24; Gordon 2001: 16). Consequently, Carmichael argued that future campaigns should focus on community control rather than integration. Carmichael's argument was a game-changer and was soon taken up by other black radicals, including Rap Brown (Peller 1990: 796).

This new perspective made a lot of sense in the context of New York. PAT's campaigns had taken integration off the table, but the issue of improving education remained. Under the circumstances, community control was clearly

the best option. Rap Brown, who played an important role in SNCC's campaign to support the experimental schools made the case in the following way:

White people got hung up on integration. Segregation was the problem and the elimination of segregation was the solution, not integration. It was the unequal nature of segregation the Black people protested against in the South, not segregation itself. Separate but equal is cool with me. What's the big kick about going to school with white folk? Them that want to do that should have the chance. But that ain't no solution.

(Brown 1969, 124)

The campaign for community control started on 12 September 1966, in Harlem. Demonstrators from the Harlem Parents Committee, EQUAL, CORE, SNCC, the Organization of Afro-American Unity and the African-American Teachers Association, picketed Intermediate School 201 in Harlem, demanding community control (Podair 2002: 35). Initially, the notion of community control gained a great deal of support. White radicals, including some academics associated with the New Left, saw community control as an important corrective to the stultifying effects of modern educational bureaucracy. Big business, most notably the Ford Foundation, got on board too. Racial peace was good for business, and in any event, the children of the very rich would never go to schools in the areas affected. Initially, teachers backed the idea as well. In November 1967, the Mayor's Advisory Panel on Decentralization, chaired by McGeorge Bundy of the Ford Foundation, proposed breaking up the New York school district into a series of small districts, controlled in part by elected representatives from the local community. The 'Bundy Plan' designated three pilot districts including Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn (Gittell 1968: 65).

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment, however, was dogged by difficulties. Battle lines were drawn over the nature of community participation. The majority of the New York City United Federation of Teachers (UFT), itself riven along racial and social lines, advocated 'administrative decentralisation', that is to say, passing control from the Board of Education to local schools (Gordon 2001: 8–9). However, the community, which was predominantly made up of black and Puerto Rican families, argued that this merely passed power from one group of white bureaucrats to another. In contrast, they advocated community control. Successive school boards, they argued, had failed children of colour, and parental control was the only way to ensure a better deal for their children

(Wilerson 1970: 93–117). The UFT's final response was to brand the leaders of the local community 'illiberal' and 'anti-Semitic', arguing that the educational campaign was an attempt to remove Jewish teachers, who made up the majority of the UFT, from Brooklyn's schools (see, e.g. Berube and Gittell 1969: 120–9, 170–5). Mainstream reporters, who had been characterizing Black Power as a kind of reverse-racism since its emergence in the mid-1960s, took up the claim, distorting the goals of the local community and handing a media victory to the UFT.

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville campaign was significant because it showed a clear break between white liberals and Black Power. The white teachers could claim with considerable legitimacy that they had been committed to integration as it had traditionally been conceived. However, the debate had moved on. The fight was now for 'home rule', a demand that the traditionally progressive UFT bitterly opposed. Howe's involvement, then, exposed him to the debates on the cutting edge of the movement.

Howe had become involved with SNCC in the wake of the Congress. Howe had a great deal of respect for the American black movement. 'Since the end of slavery and Reconstruction period there are no better political organisers than black Americans' (Howe 2011b). His initial thought was to join Carmichael. However, Carmichael had left SNCC in 1967 to join The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. As far as Howe could see, his old friend was 'drifting' and was no longer in a position to act as a guide. As a result, Howe joined the SNCC team in Harlem. He remembers the invitation to work with SNCC thus: 'they thought "well, this guy can talk" so they invited me down to the SNCC office in New York'. The group comprised the musician and artist Ted Joans, Gwendolyn Patton, who had been fighting for black rights since the days of the Montgomery bus boycott, Fred Meely and H. Rap Brown, SNCC's chair (Ibid.).

Howe arrived in New York towards the end of October. By this time, the dispute over the control of schools in Brooklyn had escalated into a citywide strike. Day-to-day he spent most of his time working voluntarily in the SNCC office. He recalls how the community responded spontaneously to the strike wave, collectively improvising schooling and educational visits for their children. Howe's role was low key, working behind the scenes and answering the phone. Howe kept a low profile for the simple reason that he had entered America unofficially, and he had no intention of bringing himself to the attention of the immigration authorities. There was also the perennial issue of police brutality, all the more serious with armed police. Howe emerged from

the Harlem office to speak on a number of occasions. Travelling to Brooklyn, Howe shared a platform with Brown and a group of black school students, who, in the midst of the school strike, made the case for community control. The students impressed Howe greatly. Looking back, Howe remarks: 'I have never heard since people so brilliantly articulate, disciplined by the reason of thought as some of those students' (Ibid.). These were the very students who had been dismissed by educational professionals, psychologists and sociologists as lacking the necessary 'cultural capital' to succeed in education, but for Howe, these were the finest speakers of the campaign. 'That is what the black movement did in the United States,' it led to self-confidence and self-organization among the dispossessed. Howe described his experiences in the final edition of the *Black Eagle*:

The same situation exists in New York State, where the racist Teacher's Union went on strike because of the Black Community, insisting on the right to control the schools in the community. A patched-up settlement, far short of black people's demands was agreed by the powers that be, and recent events show that the issue is far from being settled. After a rally addressed by Brother H. Rap Brown, only a few days ago, the school kids in the Manhatten [sic] area, took to the streets as a last resort. As per usual, the police attacked arresting and brutalising every black person in sight.

(GPI JOU 35/4)

The SNCC office was a hub of discussion and debate. The crucial lesson Howe learnt was the 'one in ten' method, used to organize small groups who would become the nucleus of mass protest. This was the organizational backbone, Howe learnt, of the March on Washington in 1963 and the Selma March of 1965. 'Martin was the name,' the figurehead of those two great campaigns, but it was SNCC's organization that made them happen. He heard of the conflict within the civil rights movement between King and the Southern Christian Leaders Conference and SNCC over the March on Washington. The story of the march which emerged from the SNCC office was that the idea had come from black farmers in Arkansas, that SNCC's John Lewis had picked up the idea and organized it and that Ralph Bunche and the moderate leadership of the NAACP, which was close to the Democrats, had attempted to co-opt the march and instal King as its figurehead. For Howe, the story confirmed the importance of the small organization and the importance of the initiative coming from the people themselves.

There was also playful criticism of Carmichael, who had earned the nickname 'Starmichael' due to his growing celebrity status. Howe heard stories of campaigns in the south, of black and white students leaving prestigious universities in the north to go and help organize in the south and was moved by their courage in the face of murderous opposition. 'That' says Howe 'is how they built the Student Non-violent Organising Committee, and not one of them was non-violent!' (Howe 2011b). While as some activists were radical pacifists, Howe's comment neatly highlights how, for the majority of those active in SNCC, non-violent direct action was a strategy of mass struggle as opposed to a personal renouncement of all forms of violence.

There was also discussion of 'armed struggle'. For Howe, this meant 'terrorism, basically'. This concerned Howe. 'I was never, ever, ever, going to do that', he comments. For Howe, the discussion of an armed struggle was indicative of SNCC's impending collapse: 'when an organization breaks up . . . one of the things that can easily happen is you get into some kind of terror.' This talk of terror was a sign that SNCC was losing its way. Howe comments, 'if you're morally wrong, you're politically dangerous and you'll pay for it'.

Howe's activities in America were not restricted to New York. He travelled to Chicago to renew his acquaintance with Minister Rico of the Black P. Stones. Chicago was a disappointment; as far as Howe could see, the Black P. Stones was a 'scam'. 'At that time,' Howe recalls, 'gangs were transforming themselves into something resembling Black Power, to rationalise whatever money they were robbing,' and that was the case in Chicago.

The school strikes came to an end in late November 1968. A compromise was hammered out. *TIME Magazine* suggested that in the long run 'the strike seems to have furthered the cause of decentralisation. Thousands of previously uninvolved city parents, white and black, who had been content to let the schools run themselves, became personally involved in their children's schools, and their operation' (*Time*, 29 November 1968).

Howe, as quoted above, struck a more disconsolate note in the *Black Eagle*. Sadly, Howe's premonition proved right; in April 1969, New York passed an educational decentralization law, which gave no ground to community control. The UFT had won, and as Poldar comments, 'In this backhanded way, the Decentralization Law of 1969 announced the demise of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville community control experiment' (Poldar 2002: 146). For Howe and many others in the Black Power Movement, it was a defining moment. It showed that the multiracial coalition of liberal whites and sections of the Left, which

had coalesced in support of civil rights and opposition to Jim Crow, would be strained to breaking point when black people began to organize for control of their own communities in northern cities. The struggle underlined the need for black self-organization and leadership in the struggle against institutional racism.

Black Dimension

Early in 1969, back in Britain, Howe started a new initiative. *The Hustler* had closed and Howe had no intention of continuing the *Black Eagle* so there was a need for a newsletter in the black community. Howe set up *Black Dimension*, a 'Community News Service' initially based in Portobello Road (UC DHP Box 5/3).

Black Dimension ran for three issues, February, March and April 1969. It was produced on an old Gestetner machine in Howe's home, a flat in Sheppard's Bush that he shared with Barbara Beese. In some ways, it picked up from where the last issue of the *Black Eagle* left off. The Eagles' programme, now shorn of any reference to Michael X, took up the front inside cover, the graphics, as in the *Black Eagle*, were the work of Una Howe. Nonetheless, there was a crucial difference between publications such as *Black Power Speaks* and the first two issues of the *Black Eagle* on the one hand and *Black Dimension* on the other. The pages of Egbuna's *Black Power Speaks* were devoted almost wholly to doctrinal discussions of the nature of Black Power.¹ Similarly, the first issue of the *Black Eagle*, which was produced largely by Michael X, contained little more than a doctrinal statement, again about the nature of Black Power, and a few quotes from the black nationalist, Maulana Karenga. *Black Dimension*, by contrast, was a determined attempt to reflect the concerns of the community. In this sense, it reflected a Jamesian emphasis on the experience of ordinary people and an equally Jamesian distaste for doctrinal wrangling. James' influence was palpable in the production. Howe recalls that James was continually telling him to 'write it down', to commit his thoughts and experiences to paper.

The first issue of *Black Dimension* was devoted to the police. The leading article 'POLICE STATE IN WEST LONDON' drew together popular reaction to *Cause for Concern*, with personal accounts of police brutality from black people living in the Grove, and Howe's own critique of the Met's community relations counteroffensive in the *Mirror* (GPI JOU 35/1).

Black Dimension's first campaign clearly reflected the dual influence of James and SNCC. The emphasis on people speaking for themselves, both in the amount of reported speech in the newsletter and in its coverage of grass-roots activism, is reminiscent of James' approach to campaigning and to the way in which SNCC put students at the centre of the campaign for community control of schools in Brooklyn.

The police were not the only topic discussed in *Black Dimension*. The first issue included pieces on the experience of black children in schools and an article on Rhodesia. The second focused on Canada and the events at Sir George William University that followed the Congress of Black Writers. The special Canadian issue reflected the contacts that Howe had made during the Congress, and thanks 'Brothers C. L. R. James, Richard Small, and Andrew Salkey, who have brought their experiences and energies to the publication of this issue' (GPI JOU 35/2). The final issue opened with a detailed discussion of the Anguillan Revolution, but rounded off with two further articles dealing with police brutality, the first detailing victimization in Manchester, the second, an interview with a former policeman. The policeman in question was Peter Devereaux, who had left the force in 1967 and had appeared alongside Howe on *Cause for Concern*. Notably, *Black Dimension's* stories of victimization never presented black people as victims. Rather, it encouraged the black community to come together and act as an agent of change. In the context of police violence, Howe points to a change in the dynamic:

Only of late, with a series of fine lectures by C.L.R. James – always well attended – have we begun to make any progress towards self realisation and black pride. But now we've started on that road, nothing at all will stop us. We will make quite sure of that.

(GPI JOU 35/3)

Black Dimension's relentless focus on the police did not go unnoticed. History repeated itself: *Hustler* had closed due to its exposés of the police. Howe recalls that '[t]he paper was printed by an old Polish émigré who operated from a basement in Fulham. A visit from the Notting Hill police, who were a target for many of my articles, brought the printing arrangement to an end. We had to fold.' A similar fate befell *Black Dimension*. The police obtained a search warrant and raided the Sheppard's Bush flat. Howe was not charged with anything, but Constable Pulley, who had featured so prominently in *Black Dimension's* first issue, threatened to bring charges of criminal libel. Howe had no choice. *Black Dimension* had to stop, and Howe was forced to relocate.

Note

- 1 The first issue, for example, discusses this in the editorial, in 'Lets Face it, Baby', in 'Black Power or Death!' in T. R. Adam's untitled article, and in Lester Springer's 'Conversation in Defence of Black Power'. In this sense, it takes up over 10 pages of the 19-page magazine. The extent to which the definition of Black Power dominated the first issue of *Black Power Speaks* is no surprise, given the factional fighting that was reaching its head within the UCPA at the time. In this sense, the ongoing attempts to define Black Power were not merely an academic exercise, they were a bid for power and influence within the radical Black Movement.