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A Resting Place in Babylon: Frank Crichlow and the Mangrove

The Mangrove Restaurant was part of no master plan. It was not set up by government fiat, funded by the GLC or founded on the initiative of the Race Relations Board. Black people who wanted to find a place to live or who were having trouble with pig-headed landlords went to the Mangrove. Recent arrivals who wanted to know where to source the ingredients for their favourite dishes went there too, as did black radicals who wanted to discuss the revolution in the Caribbean, or the fortunes of Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael or Huey P. Newton. 'Whitebeats' dissatisfied with square English culture sought out the Mangrove in search of the best music, good food and radical politics. And so, organically and spontaneously, the Mangrove became the centre of the black community in Notting Hill as well as a hub for London's counterculture.

The emergence of the Mangrove did not go unnoticed. The Restaurant, 'a resting place in Babylon' (Sivanandan 1982: 33), had quite a different significance for the local police. For the 'heavy mob', a group of police who, according to locals, used their authority to intimidate Notting Hill's black community, there was no distinction between black radicalism and criminality. Proceeding on this assumption, the local police raided the Mangrove repeatedly, driving away its customers. For Howe, this was nothing less than a state-sponsored attempt to close the Restaurant and, in so doing, destroy the heart of the community. Howe's solution to the problem was to meet the police on their turf. The police had invaded the Mangrove; now it was time to march on the police stations. The raids led to the march, the march to arrests and the arrests to a trial: the most sensational political trial of the decade, which turned Black Power into a *cause célèbre*, lifted the lid on police racism in Notting Hill and pushed Howe into the media spotlight.

Frank Crichlow, the Mangrove and the Rio

Frank Crichlow owned and ran the Mangrove. Crichlow had emigrated from Trinidad to Britain in 1952 at the age of 21.¹ Initially, he worked for British Rail, maintaining station gas lamps until 1955, when he became a bandleader with The Starlight Four. The band played regularly at a club in Stamford Hill, North London, run by a Guyanese impresario known as Dr Mooksang. The Starlight Four were successful for several years, making appearances on radio, television and in a cinema advert. However, by the late 1950s, a fall in bookings led to the band's dissolution, and Crichlow ploughed his earnings into El Rio, a small coffee bar in Westbourne Park Road, Notting Dale (Phillips and Phillips 1999: 237fn).

The Rio was the favourite meeting place for local West Indians, thrill-seeking nonconformist upper-class 'slummers' and white kids searching for the hedonistic scene created in Colin MacInnes' London Trilogy. The atmosphere in the Rio owed much to Vincent Bute, who sourced the latest Blue Note LPs and EPs to play in the café. According to the filmmaker Horace Ové, '[t]he Rio was the first black restaurant in the Grove', and therefore, it quickly became an informal centre for the local black community (Green 2012: 56). It was to the Rio that black people came to organize in the face of the Notting Hill Riots in 1958. Along with the Calypso club near St Stephen's Gardens and the Notting Hill night club Fiesta One, run by Trinidadian Larry Ford, the Rio was a place where West Indians could socialize until the early hours.

Howe's friendship with Crichlow began at the Rio. Upon his arrival in Britain, Howe made straight for Notting Hill. With no fixed residence, he moved from one place to another around Westbourne Park Road, always one step ahead of the rent collectors. During his abortive period as a law student, Howe was one of many who spent their leisure hours around the Rio. The café was part of London's fashionable nightlife. Indeed, there was a well-trodden path between The Roaring Twenties, a club on Carnaby Street, and the Rio. The Roaring Twenties featured the resident DJ, Wilbert Augustus Campbell, who was better known as Count Suckle. Campbell had moved to Britain from Jamaica in 1952 and by the early 1960s, he had become a permanent fixture at The Roaring Twenties and Paddington's Q Club. Campbell was famous for the 'Count Suckle Sound System' which played an edgy mix of American frat-rock and Jamaican ska and reggae. Apparently, it was common for clubbers to dance into the small hours at The Roaring Twenties and then finish off their night out at the Rio. Money was tight for the student Howe who could only afford to visit Count

Suckle's club perhaps once a month. The Rio was a more regular haunt, indeed he 'spent most of the evenings and weekends at the Rio Coffee Bar in Notting Hill' (NS, 29 May 1998).

Spending time at the Rio threw Howe into the path of some of the luminaries who frequented the café. This included the model and showgirl Christine Keeler and her one-time lover, Jamaican-born jazz pianist 'Lucky' Aloysius Gordon. Other patrons included two white radicals, novelist Colin MacInnes and Richard Neville, editor of the countercultural magazine *Oz*. Howe got on well with both and recalls feeling considerable warmth towards MacInnes. Apparently, one of the reasons that MacInnes frequented the Mangrove was to pick up young black men. On one occasion, MacInnes sexually propositioned Howe. Howe told him to 'fuck off' but the event didn't spoil their friendship; indeed, Howe recalls that MacInnes was attractive precisely because he saw no limits or boundaries in his relationship with black men (Ibid.). Howe acknowledges that MacInnes was a friend of Notting Hill's black community. It was MacInnes, after all, who initiated the legal charity Defence as a free legal service, supported by Crichlow and Michael X, for black people who had been arrested or harassed by the police. Prior to its creation, black people often struggled to find lawyers to act for them and when they did, were often pressurized to drop complaints of police abuse.

The Rio was associated with a number of prominent 1960s' love affairs between 'society-girls' and local West Indian men. Christine Keeler met her West Indian boyfriends 'Lucky' Gordon and Johnny Edgecombe at the Rio, sparking a series of events that eventually ended in the Profumo scandal (Williams 2000: 88). In the wake of the Profumo scandal, the press descended on Notting Hill. This media attention affected Howe profoundly:

Reporters converged on terrain that they knew next to nothing about. They were not averse to filling in missing details from their imaginations: personalities were reviled, a whole Caribbean community abused. I wrote to the editor of one of the nationals, querying the veracity of much of their reports. I eventually received a visit from strange men in grey suits who treated me as someone who was active in undermining British security.

(NS, 29 May 1998)

The Profumo affair put the Rio on the map and from that point it was subject to continual police harassment. Charge sheets preserved at the National Archives record that Crichlow was regularly accused of minor offences (NA CRIM 1/5522 3). In the 7 years of the Rio's operation, Crichlow was successfully prosecuted nine times. The majority concerned permitting gambling on his

premises; other offences included refusing to admit police to the café, bad language and 'Permitting music and dancing' without a licence (*Ibid.*).

Police harassment of the Rio was just one example of the aggressive targeting of Notting Hill's West Indian clubs, cafés and organizations during this period. It contained many of the shebeens and gambling houses set up by unemployed working-class West Indians in the early 1950s. Howe frequented the shebeens as they offered cheap entertainment – 'bottles in someone's flat, young men wanting to dance until sunlight was in our eyes at 9 or 10 in the morning. The girls were Australian, Swedish, whatever – it was black men and white girls – mine was Italian. That's how it was' (*NS*, 29 May 1998). The media portrayed the shebeens as criminal haunts, dens of iniquity or brothels. In reality, as Howe has pointed out, this was a myth (*RT*, 1972: 333). The real issue seems to have been the threat they represented to mainstream norms. The shebeens were free from the tyranny of the clock. They served alcohol at all hours and provided the venue for round-the-clock jazz, bluebeat and ska. They were patronized predominantly by West Indian workers keen to escape the racism and strict hours of local pubs. Similarly, the gambling houses where para pinto was played throughout the night compared favourably with the drab state-governed conformity of the English bingo hall.

It was against this backdrop of rising tension, created by the media and politicians' attacks on Notting Hill's West Indian community, that the 1958 Race Riots occurred. It is now known that the rioting, which broke out in August 1958, was manufactured and co-ordinated by white racist groups keen to exploit anti-immigrant feeling and was not a spontaneous reaction of the local community (Bloom 2004: 378). The riots saw crowds of between 400 and 700 attack black homes and businesses around Bramley Road, Notting Dale, amid shouts of 'We will kill the blacks.' The toxic, racist atmosphere pervaded Notting Hill for nearly a year after the riots and finally culminated with the murder of the 32-year-old carpenter Kelso Cochrane in New Road in May 1959. The failure of the police to defend the West Indian community from the lynch mobs, or to find and arrest Cochrane's murderer, resulted in a widespread loss of confidence in the police by West Indian inhabitants of Notting Hill (*RT*, 1972: 38). Howe recalls that at every shebeen and gambling house, the unemployed armed themselves to fight off the marauding racists. Overnight, these institutions became physical bases from which the community defended itself. The riots simultaneously undermined the credibility of the police and cemented the relationship between the unemployed hustlers and the West Indian working class. If these men were outlaws, they were 'social bandits' who, in Hobsbawm's words, were seen as men to be admired,

helped and supported by the community, rather than gangs drawn from the professional underworld (Hobsbawn 2009: 20).

The unrest cast a long shadow. On arrival in Notting Hill, Howe was reminded that England was not the genteel and civilized place he had once imagined. Rather, he describes it as a place of great brutality. He had already been told that it was safer to stay off the streets at night for fear of racist attacks which the authorities showed no interest in preventing. Howe soon learnt that the police were part of the problem. He describes the local officers as having a 'colonial mentality', as viewing the local black community as 'savages', people who were not yet fully civilized and more prone to licentiousness and criminality than their white counterparts. This view was summed up in *The Hustler*, a community paper: 'How does the policeman control the ghetto? Like any colonialist trying to control an alien country of which he is secretly afraid, he does it by two means: by a direct show of force, and by corrupting and subverting the people' (*The Hustler*, 24 May 1968).

Police harassment of The Rio prompted Crichlow to move premises, and in March 1968, he opened the Mangrove at 8 All Saints Road, Notting Hill, a much bigger and classier venture. Howe recalls that the Mangrove was a fully fledged restaurant, and that Crichlow served real West-Indian cuisine, learnt from his mother. The new restaurant retained the Rio's reputation for radical chic while losing the association with sleazier patrons such as Profumo and his associate Stephen Ward. The Mangrove features briefly in Horace Ové's *Pressure*, which was filmed around Notting Hill in the mid-1970s. For the most part, the film presents Notting Hill as the epitome of 1970s' decay, but the Mangrove alone stood out. Over the door was a crystalline green neon sign bearing the restaurant's name. A purple awning and glossy paintwork completed the classic 1970s' colour scheme. Against the backdrop of general dilapidation, the Mangrove looked positively space-aged. The interior was also distinctive. Photographs from the early 1970s show that the restaurant was decorated with traditional African art as well as with pictures of hip musicians. The new restaurant attracted Notting Hill's fashionable middle class, including figures such as Mary Tuck, one-time assistant editor of *Vogue*, and Lord Gifford QC, a radical human rights lawyer. It was also the haunt of doyens of London's counterculture like Richard Neville and other writers associated with *Oz* magazine. Its reputation attracted celebrities such as Nina Simone, Sammy Davis Jr, Marvin Gaye, Jimi Hendrix, Diana Ross and the Supremes, the Four Tops, Vanessa Redgrave and the cast of the hit TV show *The Avengers*.

Howe was a regular at the Mangrove. On his return from Trinidad in April 1970, he got a job working on the Mangrove's till. His affinity for the Mangrove

is easy to explain. On one level, it was local. Howe lived in Oxford Gardens in Ladbroke Grove – less than two miles away from the restaurant – and he needed the money to provide for his family. On another, the Mangrove was an example of the kind of racial integration that Howe advocated: integration on black terms, integration without the loss of cultural identity and integration without being relegated to the status of second-class citizens. It was also a centre of black self-organization. In this sense, the restaurant was the realization, on a small scale, of much that Howe was committed to promoting.

The Mangrove was also frequented by black intellectuals and radicals such as C. L. R. James and Lionel Morrison. On occasion, James seems to have held court there, using it as a base from which to lecture, attracting crowds large enough to fill half of the restaurant. Following the rise of Black Power in Britain, the Mangrove took on a new significance, serving as a place where the new generation of black radicals could go to discuss ideological matters, the exploits of the American Panthers, or share news of the black struggle in America, Britain and the Caribbean. At the same time, the Mangrove attracted the same unemployed hustlers who had been loyal customers of the Rio. These three groups, the black working class, black intellectuals and the radical whites, would become the coalition that would take on the police campaign against the Mangrove.

The Mangrove, like the Rio before it, quickly became the heart of Notting Hill's black community. The *International Times*, a publication that was associated with the counterculture of the 1960s, described the Mangrove thus:

The Mangrove Restaurant, All Saints Rd., W11. Is the central eating place for the black community In Notting Hill. It is the one clean, late night social centre which also serves good food, and black families use it as a meeting place as well as a place of entertainment.

(IT, 1–11 September 1969)

It is still possible to get a feel for the Mangrove's role in the community from the pages of *The Hustler*, 'a tiny community newspaper' that was published on the premises (Howe 1998). Edited by Courtney Tulloch, *The Hustler* was an eight-page fortnightly magazine launched in May 1968. *The Hustler* provided a window to life in Notting Hill, or 'the Grove' as it was better known to the locals. It dealt with local politics, containing advice on housing and campaigned about the standards in local schools. It had adverts for shops such as Karakata & Son, which stocked 'African and Caribbean Food' (*The Hustler*, 24 May 1968). Regular features included SOULSOUND, which listed the latest and the best

singles and LPs, horoscopes and a cartoon, '[t]he adventures of Seraphina', 'a mysterious young Creole with magic powers' who was attempting to bring down an international conspiracy headed by the 'American-Soviet-Republic' (Ibid.). *The Hustler* also kept up a running commentary on international politics which regularly included the American Black Power Movement. The magazine reflected the coalition of black and white radicals who congregated at the Mangrove. Howe recalls that Tulloch's editorial efforts were supported by the several white journalists from 'the Oz pack', who brought their publishing experience to bear on the new magazine. For Howe, they were emblematic of a new interest in the black community in the Grove, an interest that was free from condescension.

'Under Siege'

The Mangrove, like the Rio before it, was soon subject to unwarranted police attention. Crichlow's restaurant was raided on numerous occasions. Each raid was predicated on the notion that the restaurant was selling drugs. Yet drugs were never found. For the Mangroves' patrons, the suggestion that Crichlow was a dealer, or that the restaurant was a hive of criminality, was preposterous. Writing to *The Times* in defence of the Mangrove, Colin MacInnes argued:

I have dined perhaps 100 times in Mr Crichlow's [sic] establishments, and some 20 in the latest of these, the Mangrove. On no occasion have I seen knives flashing, pot puffing, or hip flasks being flourished. On the contrary, such is the command Mr Crichlow exercises over his premises, the atmosphere has been almost decorous: people eat, drink cokes and coffees, and pass the time of day, or more usually night.

(25 September 1970)

Crichlow's propriety was well known, so much so that it became the focus of a joke that celebrated his character by parodying common racial stereotypes: '[h]is education is lacking: he's the only Trinidadian who doesn't know what a great draw of ganja is!' (*Independent*, 13 October 1992). Howe too states that there was no question of Crichlow being involved with drugs, 'no one in their right mind could have described the Mangrove as a drugs den. It was well run and obeyed the rules that governed such institutions' (NS, 29 May 1998). This is not to deny that some of the hustlers who were among the Mangrove's loyal customers had convictions for possessing or dealing drugs. Yet, the Mangrove was the last place that any of them would go to deal or take drugs. Crichlow's

own anti-drugs stance and projects were well known within the community and would have resulted in the culprit being told to leave. Furthermore, it was common knowledge that the police had the Mangrove under continual surveillance. In fact, some of the clearest evidence of Crichlow's innocence comes from police activity itself: the Mangrove was continually raided, and evidence of drug dealing was never found.

The first raid against the Mangrove took place around 11 p.m. on 24 January 1969.² The police arrived with what they claimed was a search warrant. Its authenticity was never established, as the officers refused to allow the manager to examine it. The police also refused to allow the manager to phone Crichlow, who was not on the site at the time. The search yielded nothing. On hearing of the raid, Crichlow contacted the Notting Hill police, who denied any knowledge of the incident and referred him to the Notting Dale station. Officers at Notting Dale also denied any involvement, so Crichlow took up the matter with Scotland Yard. His persistence paid off, and Notting Hill's CID eventually acknowledged that they had instigated the raid.

The second raid took place in the summer of 1969. Again, there were major irregularities. The staff at the Mangrove protested at the police intrusion only to be manhandled by the attending officers. Again, the raid yielded no evidence of wrongdoing at the Mangrove and Crichlow was told that all charges against him would be dropped. This assurance raised concerns as Crichlow had not been informed that any charges had ever been made. What's more, the police subsequently used the raids themselves as evidence of the suspicious nature of the Mangrove in order to rescind Crichlow's licence for late-night trade. In so doing, the police threw their weight behind a local petition started by some white café owners to deny the Mangrove a late-night licence (*IT*, 1–11 August 1969). Paradoxically, the magistrate responsible for the decision dismissed the police 'evidence' while granting their request. From that point on, the Mangrove had to cease serving food at 11 p.m., a ruling seen as clearly discriminatory by the restaurant's patrons. MacInnes' letter to *The Times* complained that the Mangrove had been singled out and forced to close early 'in a city where any white with money can eat and drink legally into the small hours' (*Times*, 25 September 1970).

The ruling paved the way for the police's third raid in May 1970. On this occasion, Crichlow was arrested for '[u]sing premises at night without a licence' and for assaulting a police officer. Matters went from bad to worse, and over the next 6 weeks, the restaurant was raided on nine further occasions. Crichlow's case

came to trial in September, about a month after the Mangrove demonstrations, and gained coverage in the national press. The *Times*, for example, indicates that police harassment was evident in the courtroom itself. The trial, which ostensibly concerned a minor breach of local licensing laws, became 'the centre of a large police security operation' with 'more than 20 policemen' patrolling the rooms adjacent to the court and four more at the front entrance (*Times*, 15 October 1970). Crichlow's defence lawyers argued that the Mangrove served no customers on the premises after 11 p.m., but did offer an all-night take-away service, in accord with GLC bylaws. Nonetheless, Crichlow was found guilty and fined a total of £225, including costs.

The final raid took place at 1 a.m. on 14 January 1971 and led to a further trial, again on the basis of licensing laws. The police presented evidence that on entering the Mangrove, they had found three people eating sweet corn and another six drinking tea. Crichlow's defence team, led by Tony Mohipp, demonstrated that there was no evidence of money changing hands, that the door of the café was locked and that the police did not have reasonable grounds for raiding the café in the first place. Clearly, Mohipp argued, there was nothing criminal about a few friends drinking tea together. The magistrate in the case acknowledged that the sentence would affect community relations. Nonetheless, in summing up, he delivered the following verdict: '[w]as the Mangrove used as a night café? I find that it was. I do not feel it is necessary for it to be open when a knock at the door will suffice. It is not necessary to prove that money changed hands.' Consequently, Crichlow was fined £25 and required to pay the legal costs. Crichlow left court with a transcript of the magistrate's decision in order to keep the possibility of an appeal open. However, he acknowledged that he was wary of taking further legal action, as he had been consistently denied legal aid and the legal costs were prohibitive (*TO*, 6 May 1971).

Crichlow's experience at the hands of West London's magistrates would not have come as a surprise to his legal team. A book published the following year by *Sunday Times* journalist Derek Humphry described the quality of some of the justice meted out by London's magistrates at the time as 'harsh and primitive'. He gave the following account of a day spent at Willesden Magistrates Court in North West London:

The accused – mostly Irish or Black – duck in out of the dock and justice is dispensed in loud tones and with indecent speed... Even the corridors outside are overcrowded, steamy, and the whole atmosphere is redolent of the

Parisian courts at the time of the French Revolution. Willesden Magistrates' Court dispensing justice for the ghetto of what is Harlesden and Willesden is a disturbing sight.

(Humphry 1972: 85)

The raids failed to prove that the Mangrove was the drugs den that the police made it out to be. The two convictions that they secured were based solely on reports of police officers themselves and were only obtained by ignoring the eyewitness reports of the Mangrove's staff and patrons. That said, the consistent harassment had achieved an extra-legal objective. When Crichlow left court following his conviction in May 1971, he acknowledged that the constant harassment had led to a decline in trade. The police had driven away many regular customers. In the late 1960s, the Mangrove had been taking £100 a night, but by mid-1971, Crichlow reported that he was lucky if he took a tenth of that. Legal channels had failed, but Crichlow resolved to fight on.

Howe refused to stand idly by. His initial attempts to defend the Mangrove from the police were journalistic. The first issue of *Black Dimension*, published in February 1969, opened with an article by Howe. Entitled 'Police State in West London', it situated the first attack on the Mangrove among similar stories. The conclusion of the article detailed Howe's efforts to combat police harassment:

We in BLACK DIMENSION have organised an ACTION COMMITTEE to wage an unceasing struggle against this organised form of police oppression. We are in the process of getting together a team of solicitors who would be available to black people who have been arrested by the police. We have found out that a great deal of police evidence goes without challenge in the absence of legal representation. The committee realises that the battle cannot only be confined to the courts, involving only those who have suffered at the hands of the police. The issue is as large, and even larger than the community itself, and the mobilization of the masses of black people behind the demands for an IMMEDIATE PUBLIC INVESTIGATION into the NOTTING HILL GATE and HARROW ROAD POLICE STATION, and the SACKINGS of officers concerned in cases of corruption and brutality, are necessary stages in our struggle.

(GPI JOURNAL 35/1)

On his return to Britain in April 1970, Howe found Crichlow in the midst of his own campaign to halt the police interference. Crichlow was busy contacting senior officials, meeting the local MP and talking to lawyers to try and end the police harassment. Howe was unsympathetic to this approach. His experiences

working with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Brooklyn and with the oil workers in Trinidad had convinced him of the power of grass-roots campaigning. Howe had no time for Crichlow's approach and told him in no uncertain terms that he was wrong to be looking to white professionals to defend the Mangrove. Howe argued that he should turn to the community for support and take the struggle to the streets, reflecting his view that the black community should organize itself for self-defence.

Howe had no idea how Crichlow would react, as the two men were not close at the time. Crichlow knew Howe by repute as a 'red hot little trouble-making kind of a fellow'. Yet, he liked Howe's suggestion and agreed that a march was his best option though there was no denying this was a high-risk strategy. Howe and Crichlow were both aware that taking to the streets might give the police the pretext to close the Mangrove permanently. Howe recalls that Crichlow acknowledged this, but remained committed to the idea, a decision, which, he admits, showed considerable courage (Phillips and Phillips 1999: 279).

Howe's proposal was rooted in his experience of black radicalism in Trinidad and in America. As he later said:

You have to organise yourself politically; you have to say my power is not only the power to defend myself in court, but the power of the population to defend itself by taking a collective action against the power structure of this country. And so it boils down to this in my view: that in order to deal with the situation with the police, one would have to unite the experience of brutality not only with the police, but brutality in housing, brutality in education, brutality in all areas of our social lives; unite those experiences in ourselves and that unity must be reflected in our organisation, organise ourselves politically, because this government is not going to take up its responsibility unless it sees people on the street.

(Rosso 1973)

Howe's statement alludes to many ideas in black radical thinking of the time. First, in a tradition that owes much to Malcolm X, Howe stressed the right to self-defence, emphasizing that that right was not simply an individual right, but also that of a community to act collectively against aggression. Secondly, following Stokely Carmichael and the American Panthers, Howe focused his attack on the 'power structure'. His assertion that the impetus for change comes from the people on the streets rather than from the government also reflected a debt to James. In 1967, at the very beginning of the Black Power Movement in Britain, James had highlighted the police as the main target of the movement. In short, Howe saw the battle over the future of the Mangrove as an opportunity

to take the radical political strategies that he had seen in New York and Trinidad to the streets in London and, in so doing, put the black community of Notting Hill at the heart of the struggle for black rights.

Notes

- 1 According to Phillips and Phillips, the date was 1953. The Court records associated with the trial of the Mangrove Nine, however, state that he entered Britain in 1952.
- 2 The date given for the first raid differs in the agitational material produced at the time. Sometimes it is placed in January, sometimes in February. The earliest published account of the raid was contained in *The Hustler*, which gives the date quoted above.