

Here to Stay, Here to Fight

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A Race Today Anthology

Edited by Paul Field, Robin Bunce,
Leila Hassan and Margaret Peacock

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Introduction

Leila Hassan, Robin Bunce and Paul Field

From 1974 to 1988, *Race Today*, the journal of the *Race Today* Collective, was at the epicentre of the struggle for racial justice in Britain. *Race Today* was ground-breaking in terms of its reports and analysis of struggles by Black and Asian workers in the UK against police and state racism. These insights flowed from the work of the Collective, work which was not merely journalistic. For the Collective was a campaigning organisation, which supported grass-roots movements, movements which sought to advance the struggle for Black Power, the fight for women's liberation, and the anti-colonial campaign to free the 'Third World'. *Race Today* placed race, sex and social class at the core of its analysis of events in Britain, and across the world. *Race Today's* writers reflected the magazine's global reach, as the magazine included contributors such as C.L.R. James, who lived above the journal's offices in Railton Road, Brixton; Darcus Howe and Leila Hassan, the magazine's editors; and writers, activists and intellectuals such as Mala Sen, Barbara Beese, Akua Rugg, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Selma James, Farrukh Dhondy, John La Rose, Martin Glaberman, Walter Rodney, Maurice Bishop, Bukkha Rennie and Franklyn Harvey.

While *Race Today* was widely read and influential in the 1970s and '80s, the magazine is now hard to access, as only a handful of archives contain the complete run. This anthology aims to bring the insightful journalism and fearless activism of the *Race Today* Collective to the attention of a new generation at a time when the struggle for racial justice has never been more urgent. With the struggle against police brutality and racism gaining new impetus through the Black Lives Matter movement, with the Far Right on the march again in the UK, US and Europe, there is an appetite among younger activists to learn about the recent history of Black radicalism in Britain, a history which *Race Today* chronicled, and in which the Collective played an essential part.

TOWARDS RACIAL JUSTICE

From its inception, the *Race Today* Collective lent its organisational weight to dozens of grass-roots justice campaigns including those to free

the Brockwell Park Three, the Bradford Twelve, and George Lindo. The biggest test of the Collective's strength occurred in 1981. In the wake of the New Cross fire, they conceived and organised the Black Peoples Day of Action, a mass protest which saw 20,000 people, the vast majority Black, march through London, chanting 'Thirteen Dead and Nothing Said'.

Similarly, the Collective and its journal were instrumental in helping to organise the largest squat in British history in London's East End. Through their work with the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG), the Collective achieved the seemingly impossible. An entire community was re-housed by the GLC following a 3-year campaign of direct action in which dozens of Bengali families squatted vacant property. Turning to the rights of workers, the journal published eyewitness accounts and analysis of Imperial Typewriters and Grunwick strikes by Asian workers against sweatshop employers. The Collective also covered the insurrections led by Black youth at Carnival in 1976, and the uprisings which began in Brixton in April 1981 before spreading to sixty other cities. When Black youth rose up again in Brixton and Broadwater Farm in 1985, *Race Today* provided a voice for the dispossessed.

Race Today saw culture and politics as inseparable. Writers such as Howe, Johnson, Dhondy and Rugg argued that liberation movements and cultural movements emerged hand-in-hand. From this perspective, the magazine sought to provide a platform for self-expression of Black people, women, workers and others oppressed by capitalism and imperialism. Through its cultural arms – Creation for Liberation and the International Book Fair of Radical and Third World Books – and through their participation in a mass band at Notting Hill Carnival, *Race Today* and its sister publication *Race Today Review* brought the work of Black artists such as Toni Morrison, Grace Nichols, Mickey Smith, Lorna Goodison, Ntozake Shange and Jean 'Binta' Breeze to public attention.

ORIGINS

As Linton Kwesi Johnson explains below, it was Howe's appointment as editor on 6 November 1973, which set *Race Today*, formerly the liberal monthly publication of Chatham House's Institute of Race Relations, on a radical new course. A well-known Black Power activist, and one of the Mangrove Nine, Howe was a controversial choice. Howe's selection was a consequence of the revolution in the Institute's political outlook. His appointment was made possible after the Institute's staff under the leadership of A. Sivanandan, its former librarian, succeeded in wresting control

from its paternalistic Council and transformed it into an anti-racist organisation. The *Guardian* noted that Howe's editorship 'promises to steer the magazine yet further from its academic origins towards the front line of racial politics'.*

In August 1974, this wish to place *Race Today* on the front line of the emerging struggle for racial justice, led Howe to break with the Institute completely. Assisted by Olive Morris, the core of what would become the *Race Today* Collective relocated the magazine to a squat at the heart of Britain's Black community in Brixton, South London. Freed from all constraints, *Race Today* became the journal of a 'small organisation'. The *Race Today* Collective was established in 1974 along explicitly Jamesian lines. Taking inspiration from James et al.'s *Facing Reality* (1958), the new Collective recognised that as a truly revolutionary socialist group, it was not their role to act as a self-appointed vanguard to the working class. Rather, the Collective sought to establish a paper (and small publishing house) which like the 'paper of the Marxist organization', described by James, would 'recognize and record' the struggles of the working class.† Writing in *Race Today*, Howe argued that a paper 'can only do this by plunging into the great mass of the people and meeting the new society that is there.' Howe described this task in his first editorial in recognisably Jamesian terms:

Our task is to record and recognise the struggles of the emerging forces as manifestations of the revolutionary potential of the black population. We recognise too the release of intellectual energy from within the black community, which always comes to the fore when the masses of the oppressed by their actions create a new social reality.(January 1974).

FACING REALITY

Race Today reflected a Jamesian approach to writing. Its articles foregrounded the authentic voices of protagonists, reflecting on and recording their own struggles. Martin Glaberman, one of James's American comrades, noted that James liked to remind people of Trotsky's criticism of the US Socialist Workers Party newspaper. The paper was produced as a means of advancing the Party line, and therefore

* *The Guardian*, 6 November 1973.

† C.L.R. James and Grace Lee Boggs with Cornelius Castoriadis, *Facing Reality* (2006) originally published under James's pseudonym 'J.R. Johnson' (Detroit, MI: Correspondence Publishing Company, 1958), p. 159.

Each of them [the paper's journalists] speaks for the workers (and speaks very well) but nobody will hear the workers. In spite of its literary brilliance, to a certain degree the paper becomes a victim of journalistic routine. You do not hear at all how the workers live, fight, clash with the police or drink whiskey.*

Jamesians, by contrast, went out of their way to ensure that the voice of working people appeared in their own newspaper *Correspondence*. Raya Dunayevskaya, another of James's comrades, coined the phrase 'full fountain pen' to describe the process of interviewing workers, typing up their words and then taking back the transcript to them to correct and verify before publication. It was this intimate relationship with, and involvement in working-class struggles and communities, which enabled *Correspondence* to discuss issues such as popular culture, music, cinema, sports and family life a decade before the New Left embraced such topics (Worcester, 1998).†

In a similar vein, the *Race Today* Collective gave expression to the Black cultural explosion which occurred in the 1970s and '80s through a myriad of cultural media: Linton Kwesi Johnson via his dub poetry and music; Farrukh Dhondy through his novels and plays; C.L.R. James through his sports writing, literature and literary criticism; Jean Binta Breeze and Mikey Smith in their spoken poems. The Collective even formed their own masquerade band known as '*Race Today* Mangrove Renegade Band' with the support of mas players from Ladbroke Grove. They went on to win Best Costume in 1977, 1978 and 1979 at the Notting Hill Carnival. In 1977, the *Race Today* masquerade band celebrated insurgent national liberation movements in Africa with a mass entitled 'Forces of Victory'. 'Viva Zapata', their 1978 mass, was a homage to the life of Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary. Their 1979 'Feast of Barbarian' was rooted in Britain's own ancient tradition of resistance to foreign rule.

Race Today's coverage was always internationalist. It reflected the Collective's role as part of a global revolutionary movement, which linked Black Power in Europe and the US with national liberation movements in what was called 'the Third World'. True to James's revolutionary socialist politics, the journal rejected ethnic nationalism. Rather, the Collective argued that the militant struggles of the Black working class, youth, and

* Martin Glaberman, 'Remembering CLR James', *Against the Current* 72, January–February 1998.

† Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James, A Political Biography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

women against the state and employers had the potential to inspire the wider working-class movement to fight for power.

Consistent with this rejection of ethnic nationalism was the fact that *Race Today* embraced political blackness, which sought to unite all people of colour who had been exploited by colonialism, and oppressed by racism and capitalism. This was not unique to *Race Today*, for political blackness was a response to the experience of British imperialism. Consequently, ‘blackness as a unifying political identity’ (Wild, 2008)* was a feature of the wider Black Power movement in Britain, which successfully united South Asian, West Indian, and African migrants. Indeed, this concept of blackness was commonplace among Black and Asian radicals in Britain in the 1970s and ’80s, even those who worked within mainstream organisations such as the Labour Party. Yet *Race Today* remains, perhaps, one of the best examples of this inclusive political blackness. It united Black and Asian activists in diverse struggles, united against racist violence, united in campaigns for decent housing, better schooling and for defence of the Notting Hill Carnival. Indeed, it is worth noting that consensus around political blackness collapsed soon after *Race Today*’s last issue.

Race Today’s commitment ‘to record and recognise’ the struggle of the Black and Asian working class was set out in Howe’s editorial of April 1974. Howe cited Karl Marx’s *A Worker’s Inquiry* (1880)† which set down a hundred questions to be asked of every worker as they ‘alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes that they suffer’, and provide ‘an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class – the class to whom the future belongs – lives and moves’. The April 1974 issue of *Race Today* contained multiple first-hand accounts of the working conditions and struggles of Asian workers in order to provide ‘an exact and positive knowledge’ about ‘this section of the working class ... involved in successive strike actions in the past five years which now threaten to develop into a cohesive and powerful mass movement of Asian workers’ (Howe, 1974). Likewise, *Race Today*’s interviews with Black nurses and women health workers in August 1974, following the first-ever strike by nurses in the UK, broke new ground by identifying how gender, race and class intersected in the increased exploitation of and discrimination against

* Rosie Wild, ‘Black was the Colour of Our Fight: The Transnational Roots of British Black Power’, in Robin D.G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck (eds), *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

† Karl Marx, *A Worker’s Inquiry* (1880): *La Revue Socialiste*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm>

Black nurses. Similarly, *Race Today's* vivid account of the dramatic wildcat strikes at Ford's in Dagenham, was largely based on one of the assembly-line worker's diaries, and its description of the 1981 insurrection was in large part derived from verbatim accounts: the *Race Today* office, in Railton Road, Brixton, was on the front line of the uprising, and the Collective monitored the battle, recorded events and, after the insurrection was over, debriefed its leading participants.

THE LIFE OF THE COLLECTIVE

The Collective was originally based at 74 Shakespeare Road. As the magazine's influence grew, so did its premises. In 1980, the members of the Collective broke through a wall connecting their house on Shakespeare Road with a house on Railton Road, in order to establish a second squat. The new squat, 165 Railton Road, later became the offices of *Race Today*. During the 1980s, the ground floor of the Railton Road squat housed *Race Today's* production team, the first floor comprised editorial offices, and James lived on the top floor. The basement was the venue for *Race Today's* 'Basement Sessions', which facilitated self-education. Sometimes these sessions were reading groups. Indeed, an early set of sessions was devoted to James's *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (1977). On other occasions, the Basement Sessions were used to build bridges with other communities involved in their own acts of resistance. In 1984, 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.

Race Today's final issue was published in 1988, but the Collective endured into the early 1990s. Howe was keen, at least initially, to keep the organisation going. In a letter to the members of the Collective written in 1989 he argued that the organisation should continue as a basis for future interventions in British national life.* However, as Johnson recalls, James's death in 1989 'created a pall over everything. Some members were affected by it. I certainly was.' James's death, coupled with Howe's increasing involvement in television journalism, and his conviction that *Race Today* had 'exhausted the moment' brought the Collective to an end. The *Race Today* Collective was formally dissolved on 7 April 1991.

* University of Columbia Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Darcus Howe Papers, Letter to the Collective, 1989, Box VIII, Folder 4.

INTRODUCTION

'HERE TO STAY! HERE TO FIGHT!'

The following pages contain some of the articles, speeches, interviews, prose and poetry published by the Collective. Much of the material comes from the pages of the 140 issues of *Race Today* published from 1974 to 1988, and the *Race Today Review*, which appeared annually from 1981. We have also referred to the pamphlets put out by the Collective which expanded on the material contained in the magazine. The book is divided into sections reflecting the breadth of the journal's coverage and political campaigns. Each section contains an introduction from a different writer setting the pieces that follow in a broader political context and there is a section at the end assessing the legacies of *Race Today* in 2019.

This book is the product of a group which includes some of the surviving members of the *Race Today* Collective including Leila Hassan – editor of the journal for much of the 1980s, members of Darcus Howe's family, Howe's biographers, and Howe's former comrades and colleagues. It forms part of a series of initiatives designed to ensure that the legacy and political work of Howe and the *Race Today* Collective are preserved for the benefit of future generations.

I

Race Today and British Politics

INTRODUCTION

Linton Kwesi Johnson

‘Seize The Time’ was the rallying call of Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party in the US, in his eponymous book. When appointed editor of *Race Today* in 1973, that is precisely what Darcus Howe and his staff did. *Race Today* was then a liberal monthly publication of the Institute of Race Relations. Soon after his appointment, Howe broke away from the IRR and established a new base in a squat in Brixton, South London, and set about the business of building a collective of Black and Asian activists – the *Race Today* Collective – and embarked on the transformation of the old *Race Today* into a new journal of autonomous activism, rooted in our communities, with an international perspective. Whether wittingly or not, Howe was aided and abetted in the coup by two active revolutionary intellectuals: Ambalavaner Sivanandan, the Sri Lankan-born, pugnacious former librarian and director of the IRR, and Trinidadian John La Rose, erudite publisher of New Beacon Books and the IRR’s chairman. Farrukh Dhondy, Darcus Howe’s comrade from the Black Panther Movement and RTC member, rightly describes him as a ‘maverick’, a street-wise activist with a sharp intellect; an experienced journalist known for his uncompromising stance against racial injustice and a successful defendant in the famous Mangrove Nine trial at the Old Bailey.

Howe’s intervention was timely. It came at a time of growing militancy among the young Black population and a vacuum of radical and revolutionary Black political activity. The Black Power movement was in decline and the Labour Party was not seen as a vehicle for the advancement of racial justice. The strategy of the state was to neutralise independent Black political activity by institutionalising anti-racist struggles through race relations and community relations boards and councils run by the Home Office. With Darcus Howe at the helm, the new *Race Today* became an eloquent campaigning voice of independent Black political action that could not be ignored by the political classes. We sought to offer ideological

clarity, based on the conviction that working people had the capacity to organise their own struggles for change and win.

The period of the new *Race Today's* existence (1973–88) was one of capitalist crises, and industrial and political upheavals; it was a time of intense class struggle and Britain's Black and Asian communities were very much involved. This period saw the rise of neoliberalism, ushered in by the Conservative Party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, who gained power with a racist anti-immigrant campaign. It was also a time of open rebellion against racist policing; a rise in racist and fascist attacks and murders, and an increase in independent campaigns for justice in Black and Asian communities. *Race Today* was at the forefront of the fight-back and the RTC was engaged in supporting the struggles on the factory floor, on the streets, in the schools and in the courts.

The 1970s and '80s saw the growth of community, social and cultural organisations in the Black communities. This period witnessed an explosion of Black British creativity in the arts, in sports and the growth of Black churches throughout the inner cities. These developments were documented in pages of *Race Today*. Moreover, Creation for Liberation, its cultural arm, provided a platform to promote and nurture this new explosion of artistic and cultural creativity. *Race Today* Publications were joint organizers of the International Book Fair of Radical, Black and Third World Books (1982–95) together with New Beacon Books and Bogle L'Ouverture Books. This was in line with our Black international perspective. The book fair brought together, publishers, booksellers, intellectuals, writers, poets, musicians, film-makers and activists from around the globe, and provided a platform to debate the burning cultural, political and social issues of the day in pursuit of ideological clarity and ways to advance our struggles.

John La Rose, a doyen of the anti-colonial movement in the Caribbean and a pioneer of the Black education movement in Britain, was the director of the book fair. He was a close ally of the RTC with a shared socialist vision of change. He co-founded the Black Parents Movement, an independent organisation that, over a decade, agitated for youth and parent power and was involved in many campaigns against racism in education and police injustice against Black youths. The BPM, the Bradford Black Collective and the RTC formed an Alliance offering mutual support and solidarity in the campaigns in which we were engaged. When the New Cross massacre of January 1981 happened, where 13 Black youngsters were murdered in a racist arson attack at a 16th-birthday party, the police responded with a systematic campaign of lies and disinformation, aided and abetted by sections of the press, in order to cover up facts and attribute that heinous

crime to 'Black on Black' violence. The response of the Black communities was immediate and decisive. The intervention of the Alliance was crucial. At a mass meeting of Black community organisations and concerned Black citizens, the New Cross Massacre Action Committee was formed, with John La Rose as the chairman. Our intervention marked a turning point in race relations in Britain. The New Cross Massacre Action Committee ensured that the parents of the deceased got solid legal representation, ensured that they were at the centre of the campaign for justice, established a fact-finding committee to counter the Metropolitan Police's campaign of disinformation, thwarted their attempts to frame some of the youths who had survived the fire and organised fund-raising activities to offer financial assistance to the bereaved. Moreover, on 2 March 1981, we organized the Black People's Day of Action, which saw fifteen thousand people march through the streets of London demanding justice. Darcus Howe's organisational prowess was a significant factor in the mobilisation. It was the most spectacular expression of Black political power that this country had seen. It was indeed a watershed moment, that gave Black people a new sense of the power we had to fight back. By the end of the 1980s, in the aftermath of the Black insurrections of 1981 and 1985, the obstacles to racial integration became less formidable and we began to have representation in Parliament. *Race Today's* contribution to that change was not insignificant.

'FROM VICTIM TO PROTAGONIST:
THE CHANGING SOCIAL REALITY'

Darcus Howe, January 1974

Up to the late 1960s, the race question in Britain had been dominated by a liberal mystification of who and what black people are and consequently what they can and cannot do. The portrayal of the black population as 'helpless victims' has been the central thesis of this tendency, finding concrete expression in various statutory and non-statutory bodies which comprise the Race Relations Industry – the Race Relations Board, the Community Relations Commission, the Runnymede Trust and the 'old' Institute of Race Relations.

In opposition to this tendency, a small but articulate body of black activists posed the revolutionary potential of Caribbean and Asian peoples. The release of the creative power and popular energy from within the ranks tore apart the illusions of liberalism manifested in the 'victim theory' and gave concrete expression to self-activity of the masses of the black people as

the motivating force in the fight against racism. That they are victims – yes – but only to the extent that they are in the process of becoming protagonists. Witness for example the battles waged in the communities on the police question, on education, on housing, on the shop floor (Asian workers mainly in the Midlands, Caribbean workers in the South of England).

To persist in the ‘victim theory’ in the face of all this is not merely to distort the social reality of the black population. It reveals the institutions of liberalism as prime agents of social control standing on the necks of the emerging forces in the black community. In the recent strike of Asian workers in the textile industry (Mansfield Hosiery), the local community relations officer enjoined the racist trade union leadership to mediate between the workers and management. Where before the Race Relations industry confined itself to mediating within communities, today they are moving to find a new lease of life in the mediating machinery within industry and therefore in presenting an image of management with a liberal face. White workers would rightly resent these harbingers of welfare meddling in matters that do not concern them, with the consequence of exacerbating the already tense racial divisions on the shop floor.

However, within the liberal institutions themselves, the presence of black workers on the political stage, created a serious crisis. The Institute of Race



Figure 1.1 Linton Kwesi Johnson and Darcus Howe at the First International Book fair of Radical, Black & Third World Books, Islington Town Hall, 1982.