

‘Love Music, Hate Racism’:

The Cultural Politics of the Rock Against Racism

Campaigns, 1976-1981

Ashley Dawson
Associate Professor of English
College of Staten Island/City University of New York
adawson@gc.cuny.edu

Bio:

Ashley Dawson, an Associate Professor of English at the College of Staten Island/CUNY, is currently Mellow Fellow at the Center for the Humanities, The Graduate Center, City University of New York. He is the author of Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain (forthcoming from University of Michigan Press) and co-editor of Contemporary U.S. Culture and Imperialism (forthcoming from Duke University Press), as well as of numerous articles on race, nationalism, and postcolonial theory.

Abstract:

During the mid- to late-1970s, Britain endured an upsurge of neo-fascist organizing and racial attacks. In response, a strong anti-racist movement grew up among Britain’s ethnic minority communities, leading to radical new forms of organizing. Nascent British youth subcultures of the period such as punk were also sucked into the vortex of racism. The organization Rock Against Racism (RAR) was formed to combat this trend. In its five-year history, RAR drew on the forms of mongrel culture developing among certain sectors of urban British youth to stage groundbreaking performances in which reggae and punk subcultures cross-pollinated. Despite its links to established organizations of the far Left, RAR succeeded in uniting aesthetics and politics in a radical new way by drawing on rather than preaching to youth subcultures of the day. As a result, it offers an important model of autonomous organizing that continues to resonate today.

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In his classic study of post-1945 youth subcultures, Dick Hebdige suggests that Black British popular culture served as a template for defiant white working class subcultural practices and styles (29). The kind of affiliatory cultural politics that Hebdige’s study describes was best exemplified in the little-studied Rock Against Racism (RAR) campaign of the late 1970s. As Paul Gilroy stresses in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, his seminal analysis of British culture and nationalism, unlike much of the Left at the time, RAR took the politics of youth cultural style and identity seriously.¹ Surprisingly, neither Gilroy himself nor subsequent cultural historians have extended his brief discussion of RAR; as a result, our understanding of this movement, its cultural moment and its contradictions remains relatively undeveloped. This is particularly unfortunate since, unlike previous initiatives by members of Britain’s radical community, RAR was able to play an important role in developing the often-latent political content of British youth culture into one of the most potent social movements of the period. In 1978 alone, for instance, RAR organized 300 local gigs and 5 carnivals around Britain, including two enormous London events that each drew audiences of nearly 100,000. Supporters of RAR claim that the movement played a pivotal role in defeating the fascist threat in Britain during the late 1970s by quashing the electoral and political appeal of the National Front. Although there has been debate about the ethics and efficacy of the campaign’s anti-racist tactics, there can be little doubt that RAR provoked a rich and unprecedented fusion of aesthetics and politics.

The anti-racist festivals organized by RAR responded to an exclusionary ethnic nationalism evident among supporters of the neo-fascist National Front, official discourses emanating from the Labour and Tory mainstream, and British culture more broadly. Drawing on cultural forms of the Black diaspora such as reggae and carnival and juxtaposing them with the renegade punk subculture, RAR sought to catalyze anti-racist cultural and political solidarity among Black, Asian, and white youths. RAR thus offers a particularly powerful example of what Vijay Prashad calls *polyculturalism*, a term which challenges hegemonic multiculturalism, with its model of neatly bounded, discrete cultures (xi). In contrast to multiculturalism, polyculturalism underlines the permeability and dynamism of contemporary cultural formations. As a result of RAR's work, proponents of RAR argue, a generation of white youths were exposed to and came to admire Black culture, to hate racism, and to view Britain as a mongrelized rather than ethnically pure nation.

Polycultural transformation does not, however, just happen. Rather, the forms of quotidian identification and exchange experienced by white, Asian, and Black communities need to be forged consciously into traditions of political solidarity. Unlike the multicultural model, which is predicated on the ahistorical interaction of supposedly isolated cultures, the polycultural carnivals organized by RAR stressed the interwoven character of British popular cultures in order to build a grassroots anti-racist movement.² By taking the quotidian bonds and identifications shared by urban youth cultures of the period seriously, RAR opened up a new terrain of politics predicated on engaging with the spontaneous energies of subcultural creativity rather than trying to ram preconceived politically correct cultural forms down youths' throats. While the incendiary fusion of

culture and politics was integral to European avant-garde groups for most of the century, RAR brought this combustible combination to a mass audience for the first time in Britain, blazing a trail for contemporary direct action movements.

In addition, the anti-racist tradition developed by RAR was predicated on evoking links with anti-racist struggles outside the sclerotic confines of the British body politic, in sites such as South Africa and the United States. Such transnational affiliations suggested liberatory possibilities that broke the boundaries of the nation-state.³ This politics of spatial transgression becomes particularly clear once we begin recuperating the legacy of punk and Two-Tone aesthetics. The genealogy of groups like the Slits, the Clash, and the Specials, for example, runs not only back to the European avant-garde, but also to non-metropolitan traditions such as Jamaican dancehall culture and South Asian anti-colonial groups.⁴ In turn, the dialogic performances that characterize popular cultures of the Black diaspora need to be connected to the assault on the culture of the spectacle embodied in the punk movement.⁵ If, as Hebdige argued, Black popular music provided the generative matrix of post-war youth subcultures in Britain, at crucial moments Black, white and Asian subcultures have converged and exchanged musical traditions and beliefs in electric circuits with significant political outcomes. The Rock Against Racism campaigns of the mid- to late-1970's offer a particularly important attempt to draw on the energies of polycultural youth subcultures, one whose relevancy has grown more apparent as xenophobic rhetoric has reemerged as a regular feature of the British public sphere.

In mid-May, 1977 the Clash took the stage at the decrepit Gaumont-Egyptian Rainbow theatre in London's Finsbury Park backed by a billboard-sized banner of the police under attack by brick-throwing Black youths at the carnival of the previous August in Notting Hill. The group launched straight into "White Riot," their anthem of identification with Black rebellion:

White riot - I wanna riot
White riot - a riot of my own
White riot - I wanna riot
White riot - a riot of my own

Black people gotta lot a problems
But they don't mind throwing a brick
White people go to school
Where they teach you how to be thick

An' everybody's doing
Just what they're told to
An' nobody wants
To go to jail!

All the power's in the hands
Of people rich enough to buy it
While we walk the street
Too chicken to even try it

Everybody's doing
Just what they're told to
Nobody wants
To go to jail!

Are you taking over
or are you taking orders?
Are you going backwards
Or are you going forwards?

For the Clash, the Notting Hill carnival uprising was a symbol of Black youths' resistance to an exploitative and oppressive system, a form of rejection that the punk generation needed to emulate. "White Riot" suggests that Black kids had not just seen

through the lies and hypocrisies of the decaying British welfare state, but had the courage to do something about it. By contrast, not only were white youths brainwashed by the state apparatus of education, but, according to the Clash, they also lacked the courage to rebel and change the system when they were able to penetrate the veil of ideology.

The Clash were touring in 1977 with punk bands the Jam and the Buzzcocks, as well as with a roots-reggae sound system featuring I-Roy and dub from the Revolutionaries. This line-up was an expression of the polycultural character of certain segments of punk subculture in the mid-1970s.⁶ Dub reggae was the soundtrack for punk in these early days, with Rastafarian DJ Don Letts spinning records at seminal punk club The Roxy. In addition, many punk bands practiced in run-down areas of London such as Ladbroke Grove, home to one of Britain's largest Caribbean communities.⁷ But hybridity was not the only game in town; neo-fascist skinheads also turned up at punk gigs regularly, trolling for disaffected youths who might be turned on to racial supremacist doctrine. Indeed, in case anyone in their fishnet stocking-clad, mohawk-wearing audience didn't get the anti-racist message, Joe Strummer announced from the stage before the band barreled into their wailing version of Junior Murvin's lyrical reggae classic "Police and Thieves," "Last week 119,000 people voted National Front in London. Well, this one's by a wog. And if you don't like wogs, you know where the bog [toilet] is" (Widgery 70).⁸ Strummer's statement is a terse testament to the deeply racialized character of British popular culture in general and to the menacing presence of fascists at gigs in particular, as well as to the determination of certain segments of the punk movement to confront such racism head on.

The Clash's anti-racist stance was catalyzed by the evolution of new models for political practice within Black British and Asian communities during the 1970s. Such practices were based on an explicit rejection of the vanguardist philosophy that underpinned many previous Black power organizations. In an editorial published in 1976, for example, the Race Today collective articulated the new philosophy of self-organized activity:

Our view of the self-activity of the black working class, both Caribbean and Asian, has caused us to break from the idea of 'organising' them. We are not for setting up, in the fashion of the 60's, a vanguard party or vehicle with a welfare programme to attract people... In the name of 'service to the community,' there has been the growth of state-nurtured cadres of black workers, who are devoted to dealing with the particularities of black rebellion.

In turning against the tradition of the vanguard party, groups such as the Race Today collective were not simply rebelling against their immediate predecessors in the Black power tradition. They were, rather, recuperating a tradition of autonomist theory and practice that extends back to the work of C.L.R. James in Britain during the 1930s.

By the mid-1970s, James had returned to Britain and his brilliant writings on the tradition of radical Black self-organization had begun to influence younger generations of activists in the Black community there.⁹ Of course, for James and other radicals of his generation such as George Padmore, the impatience with vanguardist philosophies stemmed from the failure of the Comintern and the Soviet Union to support anti-colonial struggles during the 1930s adequately.¹⁰ In James's case, however, this disillusionment with particular Communist institutions was developed through his historiographic and

theoretical work into a full-blown embrace of popular spontaneity and self-organization. From his account of Toussaint L'Ouverture's tragic failure to communicate with his followers during the Haitian revolution in *The Black Jacobins* to his attack on the stranglehold of the Stalinist bureaucracy on the revolutionary proletariat in *Notes on Dialectics*, James consistently championed the free creative activity of the people.¹¹ In addition, his theories gave activists a way of talking about the complex conjunction of race and class that characterized anti-imperialist struggle in the periphery and anti-racist politics in the metropolis.¹² Taking the revolutionary activity of the slaves in Haiti as his paradigm, James articulated a model of autonomous popular insurrectionary energy that offered a perfect theoretical analysis of spontaneous uprisings such as those that took place at the Notting Hill carnivals of 1976-'78 in London. He was, indeed, one of the few major radicals to proclaim the inevitability and justice of the urban uprisings throughout Britain in 1981 (Buhle 161). The impact of James's ideas concerning the autonomy of the revolutionary masses can be seen in the polycultural politics of coalition that mushroomed in response to the violence of the British state during the late 1970s.

Yet despite the increasing militancy of the Black community, the grip of popular authoritarianism on the majority of the British population continued to tighten. If people of African descent were particularly subject to harassment and violence by the police, the Asian community in Britain suffered especially heavily from both organized and impromptu racist violence. In June 1976, 18-year-old Gurdip Singh Chaggar was attacked and stabbed to death by a group of white youths opposite the Indian Workers' Association's Dominion Cinema in Southall (Sivanandan 142). Horrified by the lack of official action in response to this violence committed in the symbolic heart of one of

Britain's largest Asian communities, the elders of the community gathered to give speeches and pass resolutions against the tide of racist violence.¹³ Asian youth in Southall, however, were fed up with this kind of pallid response, and with the quietist approach of their so-called leaders. They marched to the local police station demanding action. When the police arrested some of them for stoning a police van along the way, the crowd of youths sat down in front of the police station and refused to budge until their friends were freed. The following day, the Southall Youth Movement was born.¹⁴ Other Asian youth groups followed in its wake around London and in other British cities. These groups were primarily defensive and local in character.¹⁵ Unlike the class-based organizations that traditionally dominated the Left wing in British politics, in other words, these groups stressed the language of community over that of class. Their struggle tended to turn on immediate goals related to political self-management, cultural identity, and collective consumption rather than on the more ambitious but distant goals of the revolutionary tradition.¹⁶

Like the spontaneous uprisings that took place during the Notting Hill carnival, the Asian Youth Movement also led to the development of new political formations that helped forge what Stuart Hall afterwards termed "new ethnicities." Youth organizations and defense committees that sprang up in one community tended to receive help from groups in other communities, and, in turn, to go to the aid of similar organizations when the occasion arose. In the process, boundaries between Britain's different ethnic communities were overcome in the name of mutual aid. Asian groups like the Southall Youth Movement joined with Black groups such as Peoples Unite, and, in some instances, new pan-ethnic, polycultural groups such as Hackney Black People's Defence

Organization coalesced.¹⁷ In addition, Blacks and Asians formed political groups that addressed the oppressive conditions experienced not only by racialized subjects in Britain but throughout the Third World at this time. Such organizations regarded racism in the metropolis and imperialism in the periphery, in the tradition of C.L.R. James, as related aspects of the global capitalist system. Many of these groups hearkened back explicitly to the Bandung conference of 1955 between African and Asian heads of state by developing a politics of solidarity in the face of state and popular racism in Britain. The polycultural character and ambitions of these groups is evident from the titles of journals such as *Samaj in'a Babylon* (produced in Urdu and English) and *Black Struggle*. While such coalitions always had their internal tensions, they were sustained by their participants' conscious reaction to the divide-and-conquer politics that had characterized historical British imperialism and which continued to manifest itself in the metropolis.

The emotional resonance of this politics of polycultural solidarity is suggested by dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson's "It Dread Inna Ingran." Composed as part of a campaign to free an unjustly imprisoned community activist, LKJ's dub poem celebrates the potent affiliations that racialized groups in Britain strove to foster during this period:

mi se dem frame-up George Lindo

up in Bradford Toun

but di Bradford Blacks

dem a rally roun...

Maggi Thatcher on di go

wid a racist show,

but a she haffi go

kaw,

rite now,

African

Asian

West Indian

An' Black British

stan firm inna Ingran

inna disya time yah

for noh mattah wat dey say,

come wat may,

we are here to stay

inna Ingran,

inna disya time yah... (Johnson 14).

LKJ's catalogue of different ethnic groups closes with the unifying label "Black British," which unites all the groups that precede it in common resistance to the racism of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher. LKJ's dub verse creates a linguistic equivalent of this imagined community by hybridizing standard English and Jamaican patois (Hitchcock). This was a community forged by dint of anti-racist struggle in the metropolis. Indeed, for prominent radical theorists of the time such as A. Sivanandan, Blackness was a political rather than a phenotypical label.¹⁸ Skin color, in other words, only became an important signifier of social difference when it was embedded in power

relations predicated on the systematic exploitation and oppression of certain groups of people by others.¹⁹ If this understanding of the social construction of “race” derived from the bitter experiences of colonial divide-and-conquer policies, the politics of solidarity found within local anti-racist groups emerged from a tradition of struggle against the racializing impact of state immigration legislation and policing policies in post-war Britain. As the popular authoritarian ideology gained greater purchase on the British public in the economic and social crisis conditions of the late 1970s, such forms of solidarity became increasingly important.

When LKJ published “It Dread Inna Ingran,” Margaret Thatcher had just won the general election. Her agenda was, however, already quite clear to Britain’s Black and Asian communities. In 1978, she had given an interview on Granada TV in which she linked the fears of post-imperial Britain to prejudice against Black people:

I think people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy and law, and has done so much throughout the world, that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to be really rather hostile to those coming in (qtd. in Widgery 14).

The assumptions behind Thatcher’s infamous “swamping” rhetoric are, of course, precisely the insular ones that legitimate the increasingly exclusionary immigration legislation of the post-1945 period.²⁰ Indeed, Thatcher’s painfully sanctimonious voice articulated views held by mainstream politicians of both the Labour and the Conservative parties throughout the post-war period. What had changed was the frankness with which such openly racist views could circulate in the public sphere. Thatcher’s speech

delivered almost immediately bloody results for Britain's Black and Asian communities. The media began running reports about everyday instances of "swamping" and notorious racist agitator Enoch Powell was offered time on the BBC to discuss "induced repatriation" of Black and Asian Britons (Sivanandan, "From Resistance" 144).

The rising tide of racism had become inescapably evident to anyone paying attention to mainstream British popular culture well before Thatcher's campaign. For example, in August 1976, Eric Clapton, the British guitarist who had made a career by appropriating music of the Black diaspora, interrupted a concert in Birmingham to deliver a drunken stump speech in support of Enoch Powell. Other British musicians such as David Bowie were openly flirting with fascist iconography and ideology at the time. Red Saunders, a photographer and ex-Mod, responded to the endorsement of racism by Clapton, whom he called "rock music's biggest colonist," with a letter calling for a grassroots movement against racism in rock music that was published in the main British pop-music weeklies (qtd. in Widgery 40). His call provoked a response of over 600 letters, and Rock Against Racism, a group dedicated to amplifying the polycultural character of urban youth culture using contemporary popular music and performance, was formed soon after. David Widgery's editorial in the inaugural issue of RAR's paper, *Temporary Hoarding*, was the group's first manifesto: "We want Rebel music, street music. Music that breaks down people's fear of one another. Crisis music. Now music. Music that knows who the real enemy is. Rock against Racism. Love Music Hate Racism" (qtd. in Renton).

RAR made its public debut at London's Royal College of Art in December 1976. Headlining the bill was Dennis Bovell's dub band of the time, Matumbi, who filled the

hall with heavy bass frequencies and caused joyous confusion among the pogo-ing punks. The show brought together the radical Left and youth culture for the first time. This was not an easy proposition. As Widgery states in his memoir *Beating Time*, “the Left thought us too punky and the punks thought they would be eaten alive by Communist cannibals” (59). The traditional Left, of course, tended to see the cultural realm as superficial, something that didn’t really count in the final analysis. Underlying the traditional Left’s tactical failure was a broader theoretical shortcoming: blinkered by an orthodox Marxist reading of social relations, they tended to view “race” as a kind of epiphenomenon of the class struggle. Once the basic economic inequalities endemic to capitalist society were ameliorated through either parliamentary reform or revolution (depending on the particular sectarian tendency at issue), then the “race problem” itself, it was believed, would disappear. This attitude was confirmed for many Black radicals when the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) was formed in 1977. The very name of this organization, an outgrowth of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) that drew broad support from the Labour Party and many major trade unions, suggested the insularity of the white members of the British Left. The National Front was regarded as a recrudescence of the Nazi party, an attitude that ignored the origin of the racist state in imperialist high-Victorian Britain rather than Weimar Germany. In addition, the ANL seemed to assume that the NF was reanimating the putrid corpse of a racism that was laid to rest during World War Two. This attitude blithely ignored the discrimination and hostility Black and Asian people had been exposed to since their arrival in the metropolis after 1945, not to mention the enduring experiences of imperialism and neo-colonialism of people throughout the Third World during the post-war period. In order for the forms of

affiliation and solidarity imagined in the Clash's "White Riot" to become anything more than rhetoric, the white Left would have to tackle and overcome not simply the deep-seated racism that characterized British nationalism, but also that which was embedded in their own theoretical models.

Such an anti-racist project would therefore require a thorough critique of British cultural and political traditions. Although many of the core organizers of RAR were members of the SWP, they were also products of the subversive energies unleashed by the counter-cultures of the 1960s. Their experience working with underground newspapers and theater groups, as well as the SWP's relatively unorthodox Luxemborgian emphasis on rank-and-file initiative, led these organizers to engage with the politics of everyday life and popular culture. As a result, organizers such as Widgery, Syd Shelton, Andy Dark, and Ruth Gregory realized that they had to appeal to both white and black youths using cultural forms that spoke to the sense of alienation and despair that was corroding Britain's hidebound society, and, in the process, offer them alternatives grounded in the polycultural affiliations emerging in contemporary British cities (Goodyer 56). If they didn't, the fascist appeal to nationalist notions of ethnic purity would win out, as the experiences of Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities at the hands of the State and neo-fascists were demonstrating all too clearly. As Widgery puts it in his memoir: "If socialism is transmitted in a deliberately doleful, pre-electronic idiom, if its emotional appeal is to working class sacrifice and middle class guilt, and if its dominant medium is the ill-printed word and the drab public procession, it will simply bounce off people who have grown up on this side of the sixties watershed" (84).

In seeking to mobilize subcultural movements such as punk and reggae, the activists involved with RAR were treading on ground prepared for them by C.L.R. James and by cultural studies scholars like Raymond Williams, who emphasized the importance of the “structure of feeling” that knitted people in a particular culture together.²¹ Despite Williams’s inattention to issues of race and imperialism, his populist focus was leading at roughly the same time as RAR’s campaigns to groundbreaking work on youth subcultures by members of the Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies.²² For scholars such as Dick Hebdige, subcultures engaged in forms of semiotic guerrilla warfare, ripping signifiers of commodity culture from their original context and refashioning them into signs of cultural and political dissent. A simple safety pin could, according to Hebdige, become an emblem of class warfare that placed the entire post-war settlement in question (104). **Insert image from Widgery p. 68.** Yet, although Hebdige’s poststructuralist take on subcultural behavior had the great merit of finding politics where the Left had tended to see simply commodity fetishism, it lacked an ethnographic component and hence could be regarded as a form of projection rather than an accurate account of youths’ own perceptions of their behavior (Thornton 6). Unlike cultural studies scholars such as Hebdige who pronounced on youth culture from their theoretical armchairs, however, the organizers and participants in RAR sought to harness the iconoclastic energy of the punk and reggae subcultures in order to effect concrete political change.

In their public events, RAR consciously drew on the subversive shock tactics that fueled not simply the punk movement but modernist avant-garde movements like Revolutionary Russian Constructivism, the French Surrealist movement of the interwar

period, and the Situationalist International (SI), which helped catalyze the uprisings of May 1968 in Paris. Purposely setting out to denaturalize the dominant institutions of bourgeois society, these avant-garde groups used jarring juxtapositions to disrupt the society of the spectacle created by the capitalist media and to stimulate utopian hopes of alternative social arrangements. The debt of punk groups like the Sex Pistols to such movements was clear to the activists of RAR, many of whom had been active in or influenced by the Parisian uprisings in May of 1968 that were partially inspired by the SI.²³ RAR appropriated many of the avant-garde's techniques, using them to speak to youth in a fresh and direct way. Particularly important for RAR was the technique of pastiche so prominent in punk fanzines of the day. Appropriating this anti-elitist cut'n'paste aesthetic, RAR activists sought to create images that appealed to iconoclastic youth sensibilities while drawing out the sedimented political meanings of contemporary culture. In *Temporary Hoarding*, the broadsheet RAR distributed at their concerts, for example, images of Hitler, Enoch Powell, and David Bowie were juxtaposed to make clear the implications of the latter's dalliance with fascist style. **INSERT PHOTO FROM WIDGERY P. 60.** Similarly, *Temporary Hoarding* contrasted scenes from the riots that took place during the middle of the decade at the Notting Hill carnival with photographs of the Soweto uprising in apartheid South Africa in order to make the implications and historical background of British racism clear.

In addition to drawing on the European artistic avant-garde, however, RAR also harnessed the celebratory blend of aesthetics and politics that characterized the Caribbean carnival tradition to enliven their outdoor concerts. Savagely suppressed by colonial British authorities during the late 19th century, carnival had become a symbol of insurgent

subaltern occupation of public space in Anglophone Caribbean nations such as Trinidad and Jamaica. The tradition was revived by Caribbean communities in Britain following the white riots of 1958 in the London neighborhood of Notting Hill. When British authorities attempted to close down the festivities in a heavy handed manner in the mid-1970s, Black youths rioted, producing the images used by the Clash during their performance at the Gaumont in 1977. Thus, in calling the events they organized carnivals, RAR was self-consciously drawing on a tradition of resistance to racist control of metropolitan and colonial space. Perhaps the most important such event was the massive carnival of 30 April 1978. After gathering in Trafalgar Square, the RAR carnival wound through the streets of London towards the East End. With 100,000 participants, it was the biggest anti-fascist rally in Britain since the 1930s. Labor-union activists, anti-racist stilt-walkers, aging stalwarts of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, dreadlocked rastas, young punks in pink boiler suits, feminists, militant queers, and every other possible permutation of Britain's Left were united in a celebration of solidarity that decisively rejected the dour thuggery of the NF's bully boys.

The concert in Victoria Park that concluded this RAR carnival was designed, like the other events that the group organized, to create an anti-racist consciousness using pop music, or, to be more specific, the twin musical subcultures of roots reggae and punk rock. The radical historian Raphael Samuel described the carnival as "one of the very few [events] of my adult lifetime to have sensibly changed the climate of public opinion" (qtd. in Renton). RAR also organized concerts in British Asian neighborhoods such as Southall, although Asian performers were not included on the bill. Critics of RAR have seized on this omission as a sign of the blindness of the group's organizers towards ethnic

minority groups who lacked the cultural cachet of Britain's Afro-Caribbean population (Sabin 203-206). Such a charge ignores RAR's promotion of ties with organizations such as the Asian Youth Movement, as well as the group's attention to anti-racist organizing in Asian communities. In addition, Bhangra, a popular music form that evolved in the British Asian community, did not start to cross over until the mid-1980s, meaning that there was no organic popular cultural bridge between Asian and white youths until after RAR's dissolution. RAR's concentration on reggae and punk subcultures was, in other words, a product of the cultural conditions the organization confronted on the ground as well as a reflection of the group's tactical decision to amplify organic subcultural affiliations (Goodyer 51).

In order to spread the anti-racist message, RAR assiduously programmed concerts in which British reggae bands like Aswad, Steel Pulse, and the Cimarrons performed alongside punk bands like The Clash, The Slits, and Generation X. Simply putting such diverse bands together on stage was a triumph. Skinhead NF members frequently tried to disrupt early concerts put on by the organization by menacing Black performers backstage. In addition, punk bands such as Sham 69 that had substantial skinhead support had to make the same difficult decision concerning fascist followers that mainstream politicians had faced and botched. The political solidarity demonstrated on stage by groups such as Misty and Adam & the Ants in the face of escalating racist violence was deepened by the musical cross-pollination that took place when the bands climbed on stage together. The Clash's debt to reggae dub music and to the insurrectionary Rastafarian ideology is, of course, the clearest instance of such hybridization. Other examples abound. When pioneering all-women punk band the Slits

eventually got their first album, *Cut*, released by Island records in 1978, it too demonstrated heavy influence by dub music. Similarly, reggae bands such as Birmingham's Steel Pulse had come up through the punk underground, playing in punk strongholds such as the Hope and Anchor and the 100 Club during 1976's Summer of Punk in London. Their militant Rasta style (fatigues, dark glasses, and wool tams) made them kings of the gobbing, fighting, pogoing punk crowds. Performing next to punk bands like the Stranglers, their voices got angrier, guitars choppiier, bass heavier, and drums rockier, but Steel Pulse nevertheless retained a roots reggae style.

After just over a year of organizing, however, RAR was also helping to fuel a second wave of punk that produced the indigenous British fusion of rock and reggae known as Two-Tone music. Early proponents of Two-Tone such as Jerry Dammers of the Specials turned to ska, which Jamaican bands had developed during the late 1950s in reaction to imported American R&B records. For British Two-Tone bands, ska offered a perfect vehicle for the polycultural musical styles and highly politicized messages that appealed to the racially mixed audiences for whom such groups performed. The lyrics of such bands were often overtly didactic. For example, "A Message to You, Rudy," The Specials' second single, addressed the young thugs of the National Front directly:

Stop your messing around

Better think of your future

Time you straightened right out

Creating problems in town

Rudy, a message to you

Rudy, a message to you

Stop your fooling around

Time you straightened right out

Better think of your future

Else you'll wind up in jail

Rudy, a message to you

Rudy, a message to you

Admittedly, the hortatory character of such songs was to appear too crude to later post-punk groups. As Simon Reynolds puts it in his recent history of the period, post-punk groups “saw the plain-speaking demagoguery of overtly politicized groups like The Tom Robinson Band and Crass as far too literal and non-aesthetic, and regarded their soapbox sermonizing as either condescending to the listener or a pointless exercise in preaching to the converted” (xxiii). Yet the Specials’ work during the era of RAR needs to be carefully contextualized; there was a literal battle going on to win the sympathies of young white working class Britons to overtly racist or anti-racist politics. Iconoclastic intentions had initially led some punks, including members of the Sex Pistols and their entourage, to wear swastikas. One of the band’s last singles concluded that “Belsen was a gas” (qtd. in Renton). In addition, copies of Bulldog, the Young National Front paper published during this period, demonstrate that punk and New Wave gigs were seen by the fascists as channels through which British Nazism could proselytize and recruit (Goodyer 53). Music, including that being produced by mixed race ska bands like the Specials and

Madness, was subject to fierce contention during this period. What perhaps looks like crude agitprop in retrospect, therefore, must have had an immediate existential appeal at the time. As the Specials note on their website, during their “Two Tone Tour” of 1979, for example, “it was a fact that racists from the NF and the BNP [British National Party] were recruiting at the shows, but the bands openly distanced themselves from these people, and made it clear to all that they weren't welcome. It goes to show how stupid these people were, canvassing music fans who were dancing to multi-racial bands and singing along with songs preaching racial unity, and yet some impressionables took the bait” (“History”). The anti-racist exhortations and Two-Tone aesthetic of groups such as the Specials were thus not simply an aesthetic pose, but rather offered potent examples of a lived anti-racist politics. By combining cutting edge subcultural style and radical anti-racist messages, RAR was helping to transform what it meant to be British for a significant number of urban youths.

A crucial aspect of this transformation of British culture was an analysis of the historical roots of racism. As Paul Gilroy has argued, RAR saw racism as a symbol of a far broader crisis in Britain’s economy and society (129). In order to understand the relevance of race in British life during the 1970s, young people had to develop a sense of the way in which Britain’s imperial history had helped to form their subjectivity. To hammer this point home, *Temporary Hoarding* dug up the roots of British racism with withering clarity:

Racism is as British as Biggles and baked beans. You grow up with it: the golliwogs in the jam, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on TV and CSE History at school. It’s about Jubilee mugs and Rule Britannia and how we single-

handedly saved the ungrateful world in the Second War. Gravestones, bayonets, forced starvation and the destruction of the culture of India and Africa were regrettable of course, but without our Empire the world's inhabitants would still be rolling naked in the mud, wouldn't they? However lousy our football teams or run-down our Health Service, we have the private compensation that we are white, British and used to rule the waves. It would be pathetic if it hadn't killed and injured and brutalised so many lives. Most of the time, British racialism is veiled behind forced smiles, charming policemen and considerate charities. But when times get hard, the newest arrival is the first to be blamed... From the wire cages of Heathrow Airport's immigrant compounds to the gleaming Alien Registration computer in Holborn, a new colour bar stretches. Every retreat by officialdom inflames the appetite of the Right. Once again racialism is back. It is growing where it is not challenged. And challenged it must be. For when racialists rule, millions die (qtd. in Widgery 76-78).

For RAR, the marches of the NF and police brutality in places like Southall were the colonial chickens coming home to roost. In arguing that the police riot in Southall was simply the return of colonial violence to the metropolis, *Temporary Hoarding* made a point developed at far more length in Hannah Arendt's brilliant study of the imperial roots of Nazism. The genocidal techniques employed by the Nazis were developed, Arendt argued, during the mass extermination of the Herero people in German South West Africa (192). A similar point was made by *Temporary Hoarding* about the British racist state. Without the slave trade and the plantation system, RAR argued, no industrial revolution in Britain. Without lousy housing and unemployment after 1945, no racism.

Without the deeply inculcated notions of racial superiority and imperial destiny with which the average white Briton had grown up, the spurious connection between the so-called “ethnic minority” populations and the nation’s post-imperial decline could not have been made. Unpacking the scapegoating mechanism behind coded racist talk of “swamping” indulged in by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, RAR aimed to deconstruct state authoritarianism and lay the foundation for genuinely popular anti-racist alternatives.

In the process, RAR went some way towards meeting the objections of Black Britons, who sometimes expressed distrust of white radicals’ anti-racist efforts. LKJ was among this group of skeptics during the mid-1970s. In his poem “Independent Intavenshun,” he challenged the commitment of the white Left to anti-racist struggle. In doing so, he offers a powerful argument for Black and Asian autonomy:

Mek dem gwaan

Now it calm

But a wi who haffi really ride di staam

Wat a cheek

Dem t’ink wi weak

An’ wi can’t stan up pan wi feet

Di SWP can’t set wi free

Di IMG can’t dhu it fi wi

Di Communist Pawty, cho, dem too awty-fawty

An' di laybahrites dem naw goh fite fi wi rites

Soh mek dem gwaan

Now it calm

But a wi who haffi really ride di staam (18)

LKJ's poem bristles at the tendency of certain Leftist groups to arrive in Black and Asian neighborhoods in order to fight National Party members in the streets, only to depart with great alacrity as soon as the brawling was concluded. All too often, these battles raised the ire of members of the broader white community with whom Black and Asian residents would have to deal following the departure of radical activists. Indeed, this polarizing effect was a conscious tactic on the part of the NF (Widgery 28). Since the majority of racial attacks were not committed by fascist cadres but by "ordinary" people, the street-fighting policies of some of the white Left could backfire on members of the Black and Asian community. In addition, as LKJ's poem suggests, the interventions of white members of the British Left too often assumed that Black and Asian communities were helpless victims who had to be "saved" by the white vanguard. Faced with such a condescending attitude, Black radicals such as LKJ insisted on the necessity for self-organization and autonomy within their communities.

In a manner similar to that implied by LKJ, critics of RAR have argued that the campaigns of the late 1970s were not simply driven by the sectarian motives of some far Left groups, but exploited anti-racist musicians and fans for their own ends (Home, Kalra). Such criticism is an important challenge to facile representations of anti-racist

solidarity. While it is undeniable that RAR's core leadership were white and were affiliated with the SWP, these facts they do not necessarily vitiate the group's project of proposing new modes of being British grounded in the evolving polycultural solidarities of urban youth culture. First of all, RAR did not demand ideological conformity from the bands that it sponsored. In fact, it did not even demand a political attitude at all, but was content to draw on the dynamic energies generated by putting Black and white musicians on stage together (Goodyer 56). In addition, the often-stated intention of organizers was to draw on existing subcultural energies rather than to shoehorn performers and audiences into an ironclad political orthodoxy. As a result, RAR largely avoided the drab didacticism of competing organization such as Musicians For Socialism (Goodyer). Finally, as Paul Gilroy has observed, RAR's project was essentially about decolonizing *white* culture in Britain (Gilroy 115). Thus, for an RAR organizer such as Syd Shelton, "The problem was not a Black problem or an Asian problem, it was a white problem. They were the people whose minds we had to change – white youth, not black youth" (qtd. in Goodyer 55). RAR sought to make the kind of flirtation with fascism engaged in by some punks unacceptable. In this they were largely successful; groups like Siouxsie and the Banshees went from sporting swastikas in 1976 to writing "Metal Postcard," a song based on the collages of German anti-fascist John Heartfield (Renton).

Crucial to this project of decolonizing white youth culture was the recognition of new cultural affiliations. If Britain's imperial heritage introduced a virulent strain of racism into the body politic, it also helped produce the polycultural formations that RAR drew on in order to forge an anti-racist popular culture. As David Widgery put it in his memoir:

Black is a metaphor for everything that white society cannot face in itself, its past, its passivity, its savagery [...] We whites must realize, before it's too late, that the reverse is true. That they are here because we were there. That there is no Britain without blacks and that we could not keep our slaves out of sight forever. That there is no such thing as pure English nationality or pure Scots or Welsh but a mongrel mix of invaders and predators and settlers and émigrés and exiles. That there is no *us* without *them* (qtd. in Widgery 122).

Temporary Hoarding's emphasis on the mongrel character of British identity was a slap at the discourse of national purity employed not simply by neo-fascists but by mainstream politicians such as Margaret Thatcher. By reminding kids attending gigs of the UK's imperial history, RAR offered an internationalist perspective that went beyond simple street fighting to illuminate the broader inequalities on which the global capitalist system was founded.

Conclusions

In tandem with the fierce resistance of Black and Asian communities to the violent attacks of the police, organized neo-fascists, and racist Britons in general, RAR offered a potent challenge to the fascist threat in the streets and at the ballot box during the mid- to late-1970s. As the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 suggests, however, their attacks on explicit racism were ill designed to combat the more subtle, coded forms of discrimination deployed by mainstream politicians. In addition, the forms of militancy that catalyzed polycultural forms of unity such as those organized by RAR were frequently based on models of masculinity and street fighting bravado that rendered

women's identities and struggles invisible. As the formation of the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) by Black feminists during these years indicates, the male chauvinist elements of the Black Power tradition were being actively challenged from within the Black community. All too often, however, white activists and artists such as the Clash identified precisely these traditions as the core of Black British culture.²⁴

RAR folded after Margaret Thatcher's election. The organization's dissolution no doubt reflects the severity of the blow dealt to the Left by the electoral consolidation of Thatcher's aggressive popular authoritarian neo-liberal ideology in Britain. Given the repressive climate that characterized the 1980s, the dissolution of RAR was a significant loss. For, although organized groups of neo-fascist thugs largely disappeared from the streets following Thatcher's victory, British racism did not recede. Indeed, the 1980s saw a series of violent conflagrations break out in Britain's cities that were directly related to the forms of authoritarian policing and structural economic neglect meted out to the nation's so-called ethnic minorities. But RAR's demise was also, to a certain extent at least, a product of its own success. As David Widgery puts it in his memoir, "Our aim was to become unnecessary by establishing an anti-racist, multi-cultural and polysexual feeling in pop music which would be self-generating, and to make politics as legitimate a subject as love...Whatever the follies of eighties pop, there has been no sign of overt racism from white musicians" (115). Despite the limitations that characterized RAR, the traditions of polycultural solidarity that emerged from the group's public events, from autonomous anti-racist defense groups like the Southall Youth Movement, and from the

popular resistance at the Notting Hill carnival transformed British popular culture for a whole generation.

The creativity with which such groups tackled Britain's post-imperial legacy helped stimulate a renaissance in the popular arts that would put Britain on the cutting edge of artistic and theoretical innovation during the 1980's and 1990's, notwithstanding Thatcherite political hegemony. Explicit racism largely disappeared from British popular culture and an international consciousness developed in the music scene that led to events such as Band Aid and Live Aid. Pioneering work was produced by Black filmmakers such as Isaac Julien and Sankofa, whose creolizing aesthetic strategies helped to recode narratives of race and nation in Britain (Mercer). In addition, the radical cultural tactics generated by RAR remain a touchstone for efforts to overcome the toxic contradictions of popular authoritarianism in contemporary Britain. Although the lineage of direct action groups such as Reclaim the Streets, which organized a massive anti-neo-liberal street festival that disrupted commerce in the City in 1999, clearly extends back to the Situationist International, the counter-cultural politics of the DiY groups of the 1990s also owe a lot to RAR's innovative use of style.²⁵ The recent revival of RAR's strategy in the "Love Music Hate Racism" campaign suggests that, for some Britons at least, the campaigns of the late 1970s offer important resources of hope. Most importantly, however, RAR and affiliated Black and Asian community groups helped give marginalized youths a sense of their collective agency at a particularly bleak moment in British history. As LKJ was to write in the title track of an album he released during the late 1970s: "it is noh mistri / wi mekin histri / it is noh mistri / wi winnin victri" (24).

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Notes:

¹ For a discussion of RAR's emphasis on the autonomous value of youth culture and a critique of other anti-racist traditions that failed to take this approach, see Gilroy, 121-129.

² For a critique of multiculturalism, see Kundnani, 67.

³ Paul Gilroy has consistently challenged the implicit but habitual xenophobic nationalism of the British Left. For a particularly strong critique, see Gilroy, 26-27.

⁴ Much has been made of the debt owed by punk to the Situationist International. However, relatively little mention is typically made in discussions of punk's genealogy to specific interactions between punk bands such as the Clash and reggae musicians. For a particularly interesting discussion of the links between punk and the European avant-garde, see Marcus.

⁵ Paul Gilroy writes very suggestively in *There Ain't No Black* of the call-and-response aesthetic of black diasporic musical forms, but makes no attempt to relate this aesthetic to underground musical traditions within the white community. See Gilroy, 164.

⁶ For an excellent ethnographic account of the cross-racial affiliations of British urban youth of the era, see Jones.

⁷ I am indebted to a very knowledgeable anonymous reviewer for this point.

⁸ David Widgery's memoir is the only detailed history of Rock Against Racism to date. As a result, his perspective on the organization necessarily looms large in retrospective analysis, although he was not necessarily the most prominent or involved organizer at the time. In depth interviews conducted by Goodyer suggest, however, that there is substantial agreement among core organizers over Widgery's account of the movement. See Goodyer, 60.

⁹ James's influence is, for instance, very much evident in Paul Gilroy's analysis of the riots of the 1980s in Britain's cities. See Gilroy, 245.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of this period in James's life, see Buhle.

¹¹ One of the earliest and most succinct discussions of James's autonomist theory can be found in Robinson.

¹² See, for instance, Stuart Hall and associates' subtle characterization of race as a modality of class in Hall, 394.

¹³ The lack of police reaction to such killings is partially explained by the fact that racial hate crimes were not recognized as a specific category of criminal behavior during the mid- to late-1970s in Britain. This fact is, of course, a symptom of broader forms of institutional racism in Britain at the time.

¹⁴ The radical experiences of youths in self-defense groups such as SYM often led them to question established not just the older generation's leadership but also "established" community values such as sexism. See Widgery, 32.

¹⁵ As Paul Gilroy has noted, these groups reflect the changing mode of production in the post-Fordist economies of developed nations such as Britain. See Gilroy, 225.

¹⁶ Paul Gilroy attributes these goals, derived from the work of Manuel Castells on urban social movements, to British self-defense groups such as the Southall Youth Movement. See Gilroy, 230.

¹⁷ Additional details concerning these organizations can be found in Sivanandan, 142-143.

¹⁸ Sivanandan has been and remains one of the most powerful advocates of this political mobilization of the category “black.” For his critique of the decline of ‘black’ as a political color, see Communities of Resistance. For an analysis of challenges to this unificatory terminology over the last decade, see Alibhai-Brown, xi-xiii.

¹⁹ The social construction of “race” has, of course, been one of the central concerns of post-colonial theory. For an early example of this line of thought that draws heavily on the British context, see Gates.

²⁰ Paul Gilroy offers a withering critique of this strategy of “ethnic absolutism.” See Gilroy, 43.

²¹ Williams first articulated the concept of “structure of feeling” in Culture and Society. He went on to develop this concept in relation to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony in later work. For a discussion of the debates that circulated around this concept among members of Britain’s New Left, see Dworkin.

²² The most germane example in this context is Hall, Resistance through Rituals.

²³ For a discussion of these avant-garde-punk links, see Marcus.

²⁴ This was true not simply for white but also for Asian activists. For a discussion of the masculinism of the Asian Youth Movement, see Westwood. A more extended critique of the masculinism of black nationalist political formations can be found in Samantrai.

²⁵ For a discussion of DiY groups in the 1990s, see McKay.