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# Notting Hill Carnival and Rock Against Racism: converging cultures of resistance during late 1970s Britain

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## ABSTRACT

The Notting Hill Carnival and Rock Against Racism were two of the most significant cultural and political movements of the mid-to-late 1970s. While the two movements had numerous contact points, academia has hitherto viewed them in isolation. In contrast, this article examines three areas of convergence that Rock Against Racism held with the Notting Hill Carnival to assess whether their connectedness advanced the struggle against racism in Britain. The first point of convergence relates to how the two cultural forms interlaced politics and culture in response to a racially charged hostile environment in the mid-1970s. Secondly, contesting social space became a central tactic of the respective movements' cultural and political interventions. Finally, in responding to the challenges of incorporating and representing young people, the two movements became platforms which engendered cross-pollination between black and white youth subcultures, strengthening antiracist solidarity. The article utilises data from qualitative interviews and archival research.

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## Introduction

*We used to give out RAR stickers and sell Temporary Hoarding at the Notting Hill Carnival – it was a great example of how multiculturalism worked – that's why we borrowed the word 'Carnival'.* Sheldon in Rachel (2016, 129)

The renowned sociologist Stuart Hall (1979, 15) once described Rock Against Racism (RAR) as “[o]ne of the timeliest and best constructed of cultural interventions, repaying serious and extended analysis”. Certainly, the tumultuous years in Britain between the mid-to-late 1970s provided fertile conditions for the political movement's cultural interventions to flourish. Renton (2018, 39) and Schrader (2020, 134) separately pinpoint the waning of organised worker

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struggles, widespread disillusionment amongst the young and the hostile environment fashioned by the state and the far-right National Front (NF) as historically specific factors influencing the emergence of RAR. Alongside the Notting Hill Carnival, RAR helped cement culture as a key battleground for questions of race in the 1970s (Younge 2002). However, research has yet to explore the connectedness between these two central cultural and political movements that led struggles against racism in Britain.

Academics map the Notting Hill Carnival riots of 1976 and the RAR movement, formed in the same year, as significant events in the socio-political chronology of race relations in Britain (Gilroy 1987; Solomos 1988). There are notable crossovers between RAR and the Notting Hill Carnival regarding the pioneers involved, the symbolism and practices utilised, and the environment they faced during the mid-to-late 1970s. Nevertheless, studies have not explicitly explored the relationship between the two movements. Until now, the Notting Hill Carnival's influence on RAR has received only brief acknowledgement in the literature (Dawson 2006; Goodyer 2003; McKay 2015; Rachel 2016; Renton 2018).

Firth and Street (1992, 69) discuss the aesthetical influences surrounding RAR and point to "Art School situationism". However, they neglect Caribbean cultural symbols visible at the political movement's carnival-dubbed events. Renton (2018, 115), more recently, questioned what the decision by RAR organisers to label their event "Carnival" says about the relationship between black and white people involved in their movement. Nevertheless, no further discussion ensues regarding links between the antiracist movement's carnival-style events and the pre-existing Notting Hill Carnival.

In separate articles, Dawson (2005; 2006) focused on the political aesthetics underpinning RAR, and in a second paper, looked at Linton Kwesi Johnson and the Caribbean Carnival in Britain. Both movements were pioneering in their ability to interlace politics and culture. RAR and the Notting Hill Carnival sought to intervene in the broader politics surrounding racism in Britain and internationally. This intervention utilised their associated publications and artistic practices evidenced at gigs, street parades, and themed masquerade bands. Whilst Dawson's articles provide insight into the cultural politics of the mid-to-late 1970s, neither article makes explicit the association between the two movements nor their points of converging impact on the racial climate in Britain. This article, in contrast, focuses on exploring the symbiotic relationship between the two cultural forms to assess whether their connectedness advanced the struggle against racism in Britain. I argue that the timely interventions of both cultural and political movements helped to entrench a strong antiracist current within popular culture amidst a polarised climate.

The paper examines three points of convergence to establish the symbiotic relationship RAR held with the Notting Hill Carnival and their resulting

impact on racism in Britain. First, I shall identify how both cultural forms sought to intervene within a racially hostile climate by combining politics with culture. These antiracist cultural interventions occurred at a crucial time, characterised by widespread disillusionment in society and state racism, providing a breeding ground for the far-right. The second point of reference is to explore how contesting social space became a central tactic of the respective movements' cultural and political struggles. The Caribbean community's successful safeguarding of the Notting Hill Carnival as a street-based parade amidst police and state opposition, coupled with RAR's carnival-themed events featuring mass marches, gave confidence to black and white people in their ability to stake a claim on social spaces otherwise blighted by racial violence and far-right agitations.

For the final area of convergence, I examine similarities in how the two movements overcame challenges of incorporating and representing young people and the resulting platforms that provided for cross-pollination between black and white youth subcultures. This cross-pollination strengthened antiracist solidarity and black-and-white unity. By examining three areas of convergences in the practices and tactics of RAR and the Notting Hill Carnival, this research offers novel insight into the influential role politico-cultural movements were playing in building the collective confidence of black and white people to resist racism during the mid-to-late 1970s.

## **Methodology and methods**

The epistemological starting point of this study is an acknowledgement that material conditions structure our social world. Social life is shaped by underlying determinants or causal factors that are generally not observable (Priya 2021, 104). The political and cultural movements of the mid-to-late 1970s developed not in a vacuum but rather due to a plethora of underlying economic and socio-political conditions. Cohen (1993, 4) outlines causal "politico-cultural" dynamics in his anthropological study of the Notting Hill Carnival. My methodological approach draws on Bhaskar's (2008) belief that understanding the social world means recognising the structures that generate events (Zhang 2023, 15). To establish the relationship RAR held with the Notting Hill Carnival and their impact on the racial climate in Britain means relocating the two movements amongst the historically specific conditions which characterised the period, from economic decline to colonialism and the resurgence of racism and the far-right during 1970s Britain. I argue that these underlying factors greatly influenced the converging cultures of resistance practised by both movements.

Understanding causal structures, which help us to make sense of social phenomena, requires research methods capable of in-depth and "nuanced analysis" (Sassatelli and Delanty 2011, 49). Broadly speaking, much existing

qualitative research on the Notting Hill Carnival centres around an analysis of internal structures and conflicts within the various carnival committees and stakeholders throughout the decades (Burr 2006; Edwards and Knottnerus 2011; Ferdinand and Williams 2018; Klöß 2011). Several reports, utilising quantitative indicators, highlight Notting Hill Carnival's economic benefits and public safety challenges (Drew and De Montfort University, 2003; Greater London Authority 2004; Postma, Ferdinand, and Gouthro 2013). However, less examined is the dialectical relationship between the carnival, the Caribbean diaspora in London, and the socio-political conditions that shaped their lives. Such a study necessitates employing a qualitative approach.

In this article, I apply qualitative research methods reflecting the complexity of studying multi-faceted cultural forms that carnivals represent. Seventeen in-depth, in-person interviews were undertaken between September 2022 and November 2023 across London and Southeast England (see appendix). I purposefully selected respondents who played active roles in Notting Hill Carnival or RAR from the mid-1970s onwards. Weiss (1994, 17) notes this is "people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged to witness an event". As an antiracist activist and organiser of a Notting Hill Carnival float, I was able to utilise pre-existing contacts and respondent recommendations when sourcing interviews. I prioritised interviewees who were members of organising committees, community activists or people involved with sound systems and masquerade bands between 1975 and 1979. These were supplemented by interviews with respondents actively involved with the carnival today. The RAR interview participants were steering committee members and musicians who had performed at their events.

The interviewees were encouraged to bring along personal items they felt symbolised the mid-to-late 1970s as a way of eliciting memories and reflections from the period. Supplementing the qualitative interviews was archival research from the George Padmore Institute's Carnival Collection, including extensive records of newspaper articles, carnival organising meeting minutes, political campaign materials, and photographs. This aided an iterative process of contextualising the interviews within the lived social-political environment of the time, highlighting the community agency underlying the carnival, and identifying points of convergence between the Notting Hill Carnival and RAR. The primary research sought to illuminate voices of cultural activists from the past to highlight their collective contribution towards tackling racism in Britain during the 1970s.

### **Situating two parallel movements**

Carnivals have played a radical role for marginalised and disenfranchised groups throughout history. Humphrey (2001, 42) notes that carnivals, or

“festive misrule”, were commonplace in medieval England, representing transgressive moments where society turned on its head, allowing the masses to circumvent established norms. Similarly, Cowley (1996, 25) explains the evolution of carnival in Trinidad as resulting from the need of enslaved people to preserve their African cultures and customs while simultaneously acting as a means to question their working conditions and social position. In this context, the development of the Notting Hill Carnival represented a continuation of a long history of cultural politics employed by marginalised and disenfranchised groups at difficult moments. It presented a platform for heterogeneous communities to unite through shared cultural interests and collective grievances (Cohen 1982, 29).

The origins of the Caribbean Carnival in Britain can be traced back to Claudia Jones, a Trinidadian-born activist and founder of the *West Indian Gazette* and *Afro-Asian Caribbean News* (WIG). As Schwarz (2003, 270) notes, the originality of the *Gazette* lay in its connecting the local struggles with the global fights of anti-colonialism and the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to reporting on the local and global, the newspaper’s initiation of the first indoor Caribbean fayre at St Pancras Town Hall in 1959 acted as a key cultural intervention in response to “anti-black violence” which took place in Notting Hill and Nottingham the year earlier (Perry 2015, 90). Melville (2002) argues that Jones sought to introduce the traditions of costume and calypso from her homeland to galvanise London’s isolated black communities. Yet, the decision to donate part of the proceeds from the event brochure sales to the legal funds of “coloured and white youths involved in the Notting Hill events” of 1958 highlighted Jones’s intention to use the Caribbean fayre as an antidote to heal racial divisions (Blagrove Jr and Busby 2014, 46).

Following Claudia Jones and the *Gazette*, the early 1960s and 1970s became characterised by various *New Left* and liberal activist interventions within the Notting Hill area aimed at improving race relations through the prism of “community” (Schofield and Jones 2019, 161). Rhuane Laslett was one such community activist who, in the mid-1960s, launched the embryonic Notting Hill Carnival as a poly-cultural street festival intended “to familiarise the various cultural groups with each other’s customs” (Cohen 1982, 25).

Although there is an acknowledgement of the early Notting Hill Carnival’s poly-cultural character within academic literature, what is less appreciated is the cross-pollination which continued to take place throughout the mid-to-late 1970s. During this time, the carnival became dominated by Caribbean traditions but simultaneously evolved into an essential symbol of cultural resistance for black and white youth subcultures. It inspired emerging musicians such as The Clash and ASWAD, who would soon play prominent roles in RAR (Dawson 2005, 6; Sheldon in Rachel 2016, 104).

During the 1970s, a parallel political and economic landscape in Britain confronted the Notting Hill Carnival and RAR, and both sought to intervene under such conditions by combining politics and aesthetics (Dawson 2005, 1; 2006, 56–58). Anthropologist Abner Cohen (1993) described the Notting Hill Carnival as an urban cultural movement in his seminal text *Masquerade Politics: Explorations in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements*. There has been much debate since then surrounding the nature and social function of Caribbean carnivals from a culturalist and structuralist perspective (Crichlow and Armstrong 2010; Godet 2020, 6; Riggio 2004). Although broad agreement exists with Cohen (1993, ix) that politics underlies the very structure of the annual celebrations.

In contrast, RAR was avowedly a political movement designed to challenge the resurgence of the far-right and racial discrimination in Britain. Co-founder Red Saunders (2023) explained during my interview with him that the movement began from a letter he and his friends wrote to *NME* and *Melody Maker* in response to a racist speech by musician Eric Clapton. The rise of the National Front and general unhappiness with the left's response to this threat were further motivations behind the initiating letter. From 1977 onwards, RAR worked alongside its associate organisation, the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), to challenge the growth of racism and the National Front within popular culture, at the ballot box and on the streets. The ANL, initiated by the Socialist Workers Party, adopted united-front tactics inspired by the Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky (1989). The strategy centred on the formation of a broad-based coalition of socialists, social democrats, trade unionists, and public figures united around the specific goal of stopping the rise of fascist groups in Britain.

Gilroy (1987) draws a critical distinction between the work of the two organisations. He argued that the ANL utilised a manipulated form of patriotism and nationalism, which charged the National Front with being “sham patriots” who stained the British flag (1987, 171). Gilroy saw this narrow focus as leaving unscathed the institutionally racist structures in Britain that were blighting the lives of black communities. RAR, in comparison, Gilroy (1987, 157–160) sympathetically asserts, was able to link neo-fascist activities to state agencies' actions and articulated a form of antiracism which saw nationalism and racism as wholly intertwined. Recent sources (Blackman 2021, 190; Renton 2018, 115–116) have challenged Gilroy's depiction of the ANL and the effectiveness of their strategy.

This article intends to highlight how both partner organisations, the ANL and RAR, which existed in creative tension, had points of convergence with the Notting Hill Carnival during the mid-to-late 1970s. In the interest of space, I often refer solely to RAR, but this is in no way to diminish the points of connectedness that existed between the ANL and the Notting Hill Carnival. For instance, the ANL's contribution to the “Carnival Against the

Nazis” in several cities across Britain from 1978 to 1981 is often underemphasised (Goodyer 2003, 49).

### ***Interlacing politics and culture***

There were marked similarities in how organisers of RAR and the Notting Hill Carnival interlaced politics and culture, partly reflecting the association prominent figures of both movements shared. Although from different political traditions, Darcus Howe of the Race Today Collective and David Widgery, a leading member of RAR and the Socialist Worker’s Party, identified themselves as revolutionary Marxists. A connecting current between Howe’s method of black self-organisation and Widgery’s membership of a vanguard-style party was the belief in working-class self-activity from below. Furthermore, the two individuals deeply appreciated the ideas of the formidable Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James (Bunce and Field 2013, 161; Widgery 1989, 122–127).

C.L.R. James’s vast writings on subjects from world history to philosophy and sport stressed the importance of culture as a key facet of the masses resisting oppression. Carnival was one such example of this. Høgsbjerg (2019, 515) notes, from rarely cited documents, that C.L.R. James understood the potentiality carnival had for mass mobilisation and self-activity from below. Writing about 1960s London, James in Høgsbjerg (2019, 517) argued that carnival culture, brought to Britain by African Caribbean migrants, had influenced the “habits and outlooks” of British society. This awareness of the potentiality of carnival culture to shape broader socio-political conditions comes across in Darcus Howe and David Widgery’s writings on the Notting Hill Carnival and RAR. Both were exemplary in disseminating political ideas to the wider community and activist circles through the forum of their respective movements.

Campaigners from the Race Today Collective and New Beacon Books used the pages of their publications, now collated within *The Road Make To Walk On Carnival Day*, to lead the political defence of Notting Hill Carnival remaining on streets as opposed to being relocated to a football stadium (Gutzmore 1999, 372). Michael La Rose (2022) corroborated this during my interview with him. La Rose organised masquerade bands within the Notting Hill parade from the late 1970s. Whilst recollecting the 1976 carnival, he said the following:

*In, the defence of the carnival, because you could imagine there was a strong clamour in the media, a strong clamouring in all political elements of the ruling class in this society to ban carnival and to get it out of the area. The main tool that was used to counter these arguments was a publication called *The Road Make To Walk On Carnival Day: The Battle For The West Indian Carnival In Britain*. And that countered all the arguments about crime, rubbish,*



*toilets that was being put forward, but also, was saying this has a 300-year history and culture. Which is what we bring into this to this country. And it's as valid as anybody else's culture. And a street carnival is as valid as anything else.*

In addition to challenging the spurious justifications the police gave for attempting to remove carnival off the streets of Notting Hill, the collection of articles articulated the nature of the cultural events in which a transient liberation of space is an essential ingredient. As Burr (2006) notes, carnival has historically imbued formerly enslaved people with the “right to walk the streets”. Darcus Howe (in Bunce and Field 2013, 217), understood that political and cultural movements went hand in hand. Thus, the defence of carnival was a political act, as Howe (1976, 170) noted in the editorial of *Race Today* journal released in September 1976:

*Two weeks before carnival, we at Race Today gave an interview with the BBC about the forthcoming event. We said then, that we saw the staging of carnival on the streets of Notting Hill as a political victory.*

Furthermore, *Race Today* went beyond addressing the politics surrounding the carnival by forging a connection between the 1976 Notting Hill Riots and wider anti-colonial struggles. Howe (1976, 170) stated: *Last week it was Soweto, this week its Notting Hill.*

This quote highlighted how the publication connected the second-generation Caribbean diasporas’ resistance against racism in Britain with black liberation struggles internationally, not least against the apartheid regime in South Africa. *Race Today’s* contribution in championing the fight for black liberation in Britain and internationally is well documented (Gilroy 1987, 154). However, its points of convergence with RAR’s fanzine *Temporary Hoardings* are less so.

The *Temporary Hoardings* publication, targeted predominantly at black and white teenagers, was a vehicle for campaign activists to propagate anti-racist ideas to supporters. Like *Race Today*, the fanzine drew a correlation between institutional racism in Britain and the struggles of colonised people. *Temporary Hoardings* 3rd edition, a special Carnival Issue published in time for the 1977 Notting Hill Carnival, raised the question of police conduct at the previous year’s event with the title “12 Months Under Heavy Manners”. The 1976 Notting Hill Carnival Riots featured in the context of a timeline of antiracist and industrial struggles which had taken place within the preceding year. At the top of the 12-month timeline was the Soweto Uprising. The centrespread of this edition (Widgery 1986, 60) featured a photo of a large crowd from the Soweto Uprising, which acted as a background for a parody of Peter Blake’s iconic *Sergeant Pepper* album cover. *Temporary Hoardings* (Widgery 1986, 61) argued that the racism promoted by Britain’s far-right and some mainstream politicians bore an

association with the racial apartheid practised in South Africa. Moreover, as its editor David Widgery (1986, 8) later noted, the fanzine sought to underscore Britain's deeply embedded relationship with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The dissemination of political ideas by RAR activists and Notting Hill Carnival participants did not only take place in print but within the artistic practices of the cultural forms themselves. RAR events were overtly antiracist. Participants met with political messages such as Love Music Hate Racism and NF = No Fun regarding the National Front. Shows were curated with black and white musicians on the same line-ups, a rarity in the mid-1970s, intending to nurture mixed audiences. Roger Huddle (2023), a founding member of RAR, highlighted this point during our interview. He recalled:

*I think from the second, third, fourth gig, that was when we realised that we could make a political statement from the stage. And the way that we would do that, is by getting, first of all, trying to employ white and black musicians, white and black bands, some places like Leeds they would have a punk band but they would have a black music system. But whichever way it went, with the bands specifically, we would get everyone on the stage at the end in unity. So the whole question of the night was unity, unity in the music.*

Those in attendance at RAR shows were left in no doubt that they were participating in an antiracist music event and, because of that participation, were aligning themselves against the politics of racism and division of the National Front. RAR gigs often acted as benefits to support broader political causes such as the Right To Work campaign, striking workers or antiracist activist groups.

The Notting Hill Carnival, in contrast, from its outset, became a platform to raise political questions, and this continued during the 1970s under the tutelage of Leslie Palmer. In 1973 during his first year as Carnival Organiser, Palmer (Blagrove Jr and Busby 2014, 98) themed the event as "Mas in the Ghetto" to highlight the dreadful housing conditions people were living in within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Throughout the 1970s, carnival remained a channel for social protest that spoke to discrimination and police harassment the community faced whilst emphasising anti-colonial struggles abroad. Palmer's introduction of static sound systems in 1973 created a further means by which the black community could express their experiences of racial inequalities in Britain. The sound systems brought masses of young people to the carnival, many having an allegiance to a particular reggae sound (Pryce 1985, 35).

Alongside the static sounds, the participating masquerade bands became an important channel for disseminating political ideas. Renegades mas band, led by Darcus Howe, paid tribute to the Mexican Revolutionary figure Emiliano Zapata as a theme for the 1977 Notting Hill Carnival (Blagrove Jr and

Busby 2014, 186–187). The following year in 1978, their concept Forces of Victory, a title of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s LP, celebrated black youth’s resistance to the police at the 1976 carnival (Dawson 2006, 55; Howe 1978, 139). During the 1970s, brother’s Michael and Keith La Rose (Alleyne 1998, 121–123) set up a sound system named Peoples’ War as an act of solidarity with the struggles against oppression taking place around the world. This sound system later morphed into a masquerade band with themes designed to raise awareness of black people’s resistance to racism internationally. Similarly, Lion Youth, formed by Beti Campbell and Leslie Wills in 1977, sought to challenge the male-dominated nature of carnival bands and relate to young people with African-inspired mas costumes (Cohen 1993, 39; George Padmore Institute Archives 1979).

Through the *Race Today* journal and *Temporary Hoardings* fanzine, Notting Hill Carnival organisers and RAR activists provided political clarity on the importance of challenging racism at home and internationally. Together with their interventions in artistic practices, including sound systems, masquerade bands, carnival parades and antiracist gigs, the two movements effectively blended politics and culture in response to racism in the mid-to-late 1970s.

### **Contesting social space**

The Notting Hill Carnival masquerade bands practised a form of street theatre (Ferris 2010, 519). This model forged an indelible connection and point of reference for RAR, whose key protagonist sought to recreate a version of outdoor theatre practised in the Paris squares during the May 1968 workers and student revolts (Widgery in Rachel 2016, 129). John “Hoppy” Hopkin, a member of the London Free School, which founded the Notting Hill Carnival, was influenced by the lessons of the struggles of May 1968. Hopkin, a key figure within Notting Hill’s counterculture tradition, viewed the group’s activism behind carnival as a way of reclaiming territory for the people within a densely populated borough with unevenly distributed open space (Robins 1968). Tompsett (2005, 46) notes that the contestation of social space has been one of the central strands connecting the various iterations of the carnival.

Bakhtin’s (1984) *Rabelais and His World* remains an influential work on carnival and the carnivalesque, continuing to inform existing festival research to this day. He viewed carnival as a temporary emancipation from, and repudiation of, society’s existing order (Riggio 2004, 15). This transient liberation occurs just as much spatially as a second world or second life, is manifested onto the streets through carnival (Bakhtin 1984, 6).

Various research highlights the significance of contesting social space within the African Caribbean-dominated carnivals (Davies 2007, 167;

Jackson 1988, 213). Burr (2006, 88) argues that conflicts over the carnival route and struggles to remain in the Notting Hill area reflected the African-Caribbean community's identification with their ancestors in Trinidad by asserting their "right to walk on the street". Burr is convincing in arguing that the importation of a carnivalist ideology from Trinidad helped the African-Caribbean community challenge and make sense of their experiences of racial harassment and deprivation during the 1970s. Unfortunately, Burr does not further develop this argument to truly understand the impact of claiming social terrain through the Notting Hill Carnival had on the struggle against racism in the area and further afield.

Peeren (2007) sensitively applies Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque framework to understand the Notting Hill Carnival. Like Bakhtin, Peeren (2007, 71) views the carnival as its own world but rejects his notion that it exists as a "second world" removed from British society's dogmas. The Notting Hill Carnival is in dialectical contact with broader racial politics in Britain, invading the hostile everyday world and creating a contradiction within prevailing societal territory (2007, 71). Rather than acting as a means of escapism, the carnival provided black communities with a tool to challenge hostile environments during the 1970s. Peeren emphasises Notting Hill Carnival's significant territorial resistance to a racist landscape in Britain. However, her article's focus on comparing the parade with the late-1990s Carnival Against Capitalism demonstrations in London is a missed opportunity. A more revealing comparison would be to contrast Notting Hill Carnival's tactic of contesting social space with those of its 1970s contemporary RAR.

The strongest homage RAR and the ANL paid to the pre-existing Notting Hill Carnival was to confer their most politically impactful events with the same name and a shared ethos. As Goodyer (2003, 54–55) notes, whilst 1960s iconography was apparent at the "Carnival Against the Nazis", the concept of registering antiracist protest through a mass street procession and music concert aligned with the Caribbean tradition. Alongside the adoption of the name carnival were other Caribbean cultural symbols, including music floats featuring bands such as reggae outfit Misty in Roots and steelpan players performing in the processions to carnivals in the park and a pre-rally at Trafalgar Square during the first RAR/ANL Carnival.

The lively processions organisers planned, which took place ahead of a full line-up of bands on stages within the parks, represented evidence of the Notting Hill Carnival's aesthetical influence on RAR and a convergence of their political tactics. Debbie Golt (2023), a DJ at the Manchester RAR/ANL Carnival in 1978, suggested during our interview that although English fayre style carnivals were a feature of growing up in the Isle of Wight and elsewhere in Britain, she was in no doubt that the primary influence on the street processions, at the beginning of each RAR/ANL Carnival, was the Notting Hill parade. RAR intended to put on a show of force at their carnival events, which

the racist right would be unable to match (Goodyer 2003, 54–55). This tactic is similar to that pursued through the Notting Hill Carnivals of the 1970s, where the contesting of space inscribed the surrounding political landscape of the annual event (Jackson 1988, 213).

Furthermore, Golt (2023) pointed out during the interview that the marches, before arrival into the parks, had the intention of weaving through streets “in need of healing”. Describing the first London march from Trafalgar Square to Victoria Park in East London, she said:

*It could go anywhere it wanted to it could control the streets because the route that march took was incredible ... and as it went through it was a healing march, it actually healed where it went because it went through particularly the areas where more Asian people lived, because then they were taking the brunt perhaps much more than the African Caribbean community.*

The RAR procession, Golt portrayed, aimed to reclaim streets terrorised by racial violence and harassment synonymous with affiliates of the National Front. Denying fascists a “platform” or physical space to organise and grow was an established tactic increasingly adopted by the left in the mid-1970s (Smith 2020, 5). However, the healing marches also provided opportunities to forge ties with migrant communities facing the brunt of racism akin to a process Putnam (2002) labelled bridging (Alferink in Bosma, 2012, 99). Their street parade acted as an exhibition of an alternative society. The marches represented a convivial, inclusive society where black, white and Asian communities could collectively express themselves without fear from the hostilities too often present in 1970s Britain. To this end, the marches were, as Peeren (2007) described, the Notting Hill Carnival, a Bakhtian second world presenting an antiracist challenge to the hostile everyday world.

1976 represented the most fraught struggles over social space in the Notting Hill Carnival’s decade-long history when police and the local council attempted to pressurise organisers into moving the event off the streets (Pryce 1985, 37). The subsequent resistance to heavy-handed policing by predominantly black young people, provided an example to disenfranchised young white people. The Clash’s song “White Riot”, inspired by the 1976 carnival uprisings in which band members Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon were in attendance, reflects this. The youth resistance displayed in Notting Hill during August 1976 undoubtedly influenced RAR’s development. However, the brief defence of social space came at a cost the following year when the area surrounding Portobello Green, the epicentre of conflict with the police the previous year, was prohibited from inclusion in the carnival route plan of 1977.

A year later, the more junior movement, RAR, reciprocated Notting Hill Carnival’s cultural influence by demonstrating how to reclaim the Portobello Green area as part of the annual Caribbean event. The Victoria Park “Carnival

Against the Nazis” that RAR and the ANL organised in 1978 was a hugely influential antiracist event offering a model of how a live stage with an eclectic roster of musicians could complement pre-existing art forms within the carnival tradition and reflect the musical interests of the majority of young people growing up in Britain at the time. During our interview, Wilf Walker (2022), a carnival organiser, explained that he had contacted Roger Green of Star Hire and enlisted him to set up a stage at the 1979 Notting Hill Carnival. Star Hire was a company that provided the staging for the Victoria Park RAR/ANL Carnival the previous year. Wilf was clear that one of his objectives in setting up the first-ever live stage within the Notting Hill event was to reclaim the Portobello Green space, which had been absent from the carnival footprint since 1976.

Wilf’s live music stage became a feature of the Notting Hill Carnival from 1979 until the 2000s. It represented one of the many ways political and cultural movements of the 1970s challenged the status quo by contesting public space on behalf of otherwise marginal sections of society, principally black communities and disenfranchised young people who coalesced around punk and reggae subcultures. The demands these two movements put forward when claiming social space became inextricably intertwined with the struggles against racism in Britain during the mid-to-late 1970s. By defending the right of Notting Hill Carnival to remain on the streets of West London, the black community gained collective confidence in their ability to challenge police provocation and preserved their annual platform for self-expression. Similarly, RAR and the ANL’s Carnivals Against the Nazis and smaller gigs entrenched a strong antiracist presence, based on black and white unity, in spaces the far-right had previously sought to build.

### ***Cross-pollinating black and white youth subcultures***

The final point of convergence between Notting Hill Carnival and RAR I want to explore is how both cultural forms, in responding to demands for the representation of otherwise disenfranchised young people, mutually provided a platform for the cross-pollination of black and white youth subcultures. Cohen (1982; 1993) highlights how the embryonic Notting Hill Carnival of the mid-1960s, organised by Rhuane Laslett and the London Free School, actively sought to encourage a poly-cultural convergence of migrant communities in the area. He subsequently states that the declining economic outlook and rising unemployment during the 1970s reduced the solidarity between black and white communities within Notting Hill, reflecting the loss of “poly-ethnic participation” within the carnival (Cohen 1993). The rise in public animosity towards black communities, symbolised by Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968, cannot be underestimated. However, Cohen’s research neglects evidence that the carnival remained an

inclusive cross-pollination site between black and white communities, principally amongst the young of the 1970s.

Dawson (2005, 4) notes that a poly-cultural convergence of black, white and Asian youth subcultures characterised the mid-1970s. During this time, the Notting Hill footprint became a haunt of black and white emerging musicians who would soon play prominent roles in the burgeoning RAR movement. Examples were Joe Strummer of The Clash and members of reggae band ASWAD, based in Ladbroke Grove. Singer Carole Grimes lived in All Saint's Road, and Matumbi's Dennis Bovell held a residency at The Metro Youth Club on Tavistock Crescent (Vague 2012). By the mid-1970s, reggae and punk were increasing audiences as the music genres spoke to the lived experiences of black and white young people, reflecting their anger, despair and hunger for change (Huddle 2016, 15).

Black and white youth subcultures were not closed homogenous groupings operating in isolation from each other. Writings on youth subcultures, such as Hebdige (2012), underline reggae music's influence on the emerging punk scene, which broadly acted as an incubator for white appreciation of reggae and black culture (Partridge 2010, 189). As the Notting Hill Carnival responded to the demands to become an event more inclusive of the plethora of Caribbean cultures and identities, including reggae and sound systems, it became its own incubator for punk-inspired subcultures staking their claim for expression and representation within the carnival. This is evidenced by Wilf Walker's (2022) collection of carnival event posters from the late 1970s onwards, showcasing a mixed line-up of black and white musicians. Mykaell Riley (2022), formerly of the reggae band Steel Pulse, who performed at the 1978 RAR/ANL Carnival in Victoria Park, substantiates Wilf's poster archives. Whilst discussing the Notting Hill Carnival during our interview, Riley said:

*As we moved from 76 to say 78, which is Rock Against Racism, just two years. We see a conversation in terms of the politicisation of [Notting Hill] Carnival and the messages coming out of carnival in terms of community cohesion ... ..in the mid 70s we also see, which shouldn't be dismissed from carnival is punk, and it might seem like nothing to do with carnival but this is a young rebellious I think youth community that are saying the state doesn't represent us. And guess what, we grew up with the same black music you did, and it was in our houses too. And we're attending carnival as well.*

Throughout the 1970s, Notting Hill Carnival was confronted by what Klöß (2011) usefully describes as clashes of representations. Within the Bakhtian (1984, 7–8) model, a carnival permits no spectators; its essence embraces all people, and everyone participates. In practice, this presented carnival organisers with constant challenges of relating to new demographics without losing what they saw as the spirit of carnival. During the early to mid-1970s, Leslie Palmer sought to address the challenges of representation posed by

second-generation African Caribbeans, who were predominantly not from backgrounds familiar with carnival, by introducing the static sound system. Towards the late 1970s, carnival organisers reflected the cross-pollination of youth subcultures occurring locally by hosting a mix of white and black bands on the first Notting Hill Carnival stage in 1979. Reggae acts Misty in Roots, ASWAD and Sons of Jah featured alongside post-punk bands The Raincoats, The Passions and folk-blues singer Carol Grimes.

There is a clear association between the black and white musicians featuring on Wilf Walker's first Notting Hill Carnival stage in 1979 and the RAR carnival-themed events. Less than a year before featuring on the Notting Hill live stage, ASWAD and Misty performed at RAR's second carnival in September 1978 at Hyde Park alongside white bands, including Sham 69. As referenced earlier, Huddle (2022) and other organisers of RAR sought to make an anti-racist statement by combining black and white bands from the stage. Nevertheless, as much literature on RAR highlights (Blackman 2021; Dawson 2005; Goodyer 2003), the decision to showcase mixed bands went beyond making a political statement. Akin to the Notting Hill Carnival organisers, the pressure of providing a platform representative of disenfranchised black and white youth subcultures confronted RAR.

RAR distinguished itself from Music for Socialism (MFS), formed a year earlier, by meeting young people where they were and nurturing the rebellious anti-establishment nature of the emerging punk scene (Firth and Street 1992, 68). This pressure to connect with young people where they were and provide spaces for youth-subcultural expression became evidenced within the shifts in musical genres RAR adopted throughout the lifespan of their events. The first RAR gig took place on 12 November 1976 at the Princess Alice pub in Forest Gate with Carol Grime and the London Boogie Band (Huddle 2016, 13). Carol Grime again featured a month later on a line-up including Matumbi and soul band Limousine at the Royal College of Art (Blackman 2021, 132).

However, punk and reggae acts soon began dominating RAR rosters at the expense of blues and soul bands. Goodyer (2003, 52–53) clarifies this turn as RAR founders Roger Huddle and Red Saunders appreciating reggae and punk's political potential, not least reggae's association with the Notting Hill Carnival. Reggae had become a central conduit of cultural expression, articulating the black communities' conflict with the police and state more generally. This conflict became evidenced in the anti-police eruption at the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival, as Goodyer (2003, 49) notes, a formative lesson for punk and RAR, in the continuity between cultural expression and political action.

A further defining lesson for RAR organisers on the political potency of reggae came in August 1977 at the Battle of Lewisham. The black community of the London borough, predominantly young, joined sections of the left in repelling a large National Front march and a repressive police force obstinately



attempting to enable the far-right demonstration through the heart of the multicultural area. Saunders in Rachel (2016, 108) recalled the role reggae played as the anthem of community resistance on the day when an “old Caribbean lady” opened the first-floor window of a 3-storey terrace house and blasted out Bob Marley’s *Get Up Stand Up* from her hi-fi speakers. The Battle of Lewisham showcased young black people’s pivotal role in resisting racism in Britain. During these years, Pryce (1985, 49) argues that reggae had superseded calypso as the weapon of symbolic resistance to state oppression. Hence, a shift towards providing platforms for reggae acts was an essential task facing RAR as an antiracist political movement utilising music.

The decision to represent punk at RAR’s shows carried a different motive than including reggae. Punk shared with reggae its anti-establishment philosophy and energy to challenge the lack of a future offered to the young. However, the rise of the neo-Nazi National Front in the 1970s and their attempts at openly courting white subcultures added extra impetus for the antiracist political movement to offer a home to punk acts. RAR organisers grasped that punk was at a crossroads; it could have gone either way (Blackman 2021, 148), in terms of the far-right gaining more significant influence or a continuation of the cross-fertilisation with black subcultures which RAR sought to engender. Partridge (2010, 178–179) emphasises RAR’s struggles with prizing Jimmy Pursey of the punk band Sham 69 away from his far-right following. The approach of white and black bands sharing stages and speaking out against racism was a crucial component of the strategy. Sham 69 joined reggae band Misty in Roots and ASWAD in performing at the second RAR/ANL Carnival in September 1978.

Literature on RAR (Firth and Street 1992, 68; Partridge 2010, 186) depict the political movement as either a child of punk or the cross-fertilisation of black and white youth subcultures more generally. What is clear is that by understanding the importance of providing representative platforms for reggae and punk, RAR concretised the union of the two youth subcultures on an antiracist political footing. The best measure of the political movement’s effectiveness was the decline in support for the National Front towards the late 1970s. Besides the Notting Hill Carnival, which concurrently afforded space for the cross-pollination of black and white young people to take place, through the introduction of sound systems and Wilf Walker’s eclectic live music stages, RAR played a significant role in heralding multicultural Britain where liberated spaces of free cultural exchange could become more of a norm (Goodyer 2003, 48).

## Conclusion

This article has examined three areas of association between the Notting Hill Carnival and RAR. Previous writings on the two cultural forms have explored

similar themes. However, such research has focused on one of the two political and cultural movements in isolation from the other, neglecting important points of convergence. Both movements assumed no separation between politics and culture during the politicised and racially charged climate of the mid-to-late 1970s. Actively imbued in the two respective art forms was a politics which explicitly and implicitly challenged and critiqued racism and imperialism both within their cultural symbols and accompanying organisational literature. The contestation of social space represented further convergence between the respective movements. For participants of the Notting Hill Carnival, principally but not exclusively London's African Caribbean community, claiming public space during the two-day event represented a challenge to the everyday hostile landscape in Britain.

Similarly, the RAR dubbed carnivals actively sought to reclaim streets blighted by racist violence on behalf of antiracists and otherwise marginalised sections of society. Both movements, while staking a claim on public space, showcased an alternative convivial and inclusive society. Finally, in responding to the pressures to represent disenfranchised young people, Notting Hill Carnival and RAR became crucial channels for the cross-pollination of black and white youth subcultures, solidifying a cosmopolitan and antiracist bond amongst the young. The three examined areas of convergence between the two movements are important factors when assessing the extent to which they advanced the struggle against racism in Britain. Whilst RAR became widely credited with hastening the decline of the National Front, the Notting Hill Carnival's role in tackling racism is far less pronounced. However, the Caribbean carnival in Britain acted as a pioneering cultural form that engendered a collective confidence within the black community in their ability to resist racism and for the young to carve out a space for themselves to be who they wanted to be.

By examining the Notting Hill Carnival's relationship with RAR during the mid-to-late 1970s, this research has been able to resituate the Caribbean carnival tradition within the field of 1970s antiracist politics in Britain. Drawing parallels in the tactics and techniques of the two movements helps us to understand better a historically specific juncture in post-war politics where a marriage of politico-cultural interventions achieved relative success in overcoming an impasse reached by conventional antiracist approaches confronted with a declining worker's movement, gloomy economic outlook, state racism and a resurgent far-right. In recent years, concern for the Notting Hill Carnival has shifted to the disciplines of Leisure and Tourism, addressing event management or public order challenges. This article invites researchers to reimagine the Notting Hill Carnival in view of its historical contribution towards tackling racism in Britain.

## Ethics statement

Before conducting interviews, I gave each respondent an information sheet outlining the nature and purpose of the study and their right to withdraw consent. Once the interviewees were happy to proceed, I obtained a signed consent form explicitly requesting permission to quote their responses with given names in research outputs. My research was approved by the Sociology Research Ethics Committee at Goldsmiths, University of London, prior to the commencement of data collection.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix: List of Interviews

- Adrian 'Smokey Joe' Joseph (15.09.22), DJ bandleader in carnival since the 1970s.
- Carole Grimes (31.03.23), Musician, lived and performed in Notting Hill and for RAR.
- Cecil Gutzmore (01.09.22), worked at the Black People's Information Centre in Notting Hill during the mid-1970s.
- Dr Claire Holder OBE (15.09.22), Chief Executive of the Notting Hill Carnival from 1989 to 2002.
- Debbie Golt (17.03.23), ANL activist and DJ at ANL/RAR Manchester Carnival in 1978.
- Farrukh Dhondy (16.11.23), Writer for Race Today from 1970.
- Michael La Rose (13.10.22), founded a sound system and mas band in carnival from 1979.
- Monique Jamera (22.10.23), mas bandleader of Ashantix, participant of carnival today.
- Moyra Samuels (08.12.22), community activist and participant of carnival today.
- Dr Mykaell Riley (27.10.22), founder member of Steel Pulse, performed at ANL/RAR Victoria Park Carnival in 1978.
- Sonny Blacks (15.09.22), a music promoter of Caribbean culture since the early 1960s.
- Tom Vague (08.12.22), community historian of Notting Hill.
- Red Saunders (10.11.23), co-founder of RAR.
- Ricky Belgrave (30.05.23), Chairperson of the British Association of Sound Systems.
- Roger Huddle (12.01.23), co-founder of RAR.
- Ruth Gregory (28.01.23), steering committee of RAR.
- Wilf Walker OBE (17.11.22), former Carnival Chair, introduced the first music stages to Notting Hill Carnival in 1979.