

STRUGGLES FOR BLACK COMMUNITY

Four films by Colin Prescod

INSTITUTE OF
RACE
RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Black History is not just about celebrating the lives and exploits of a few key individuals or taking stock one month in the year of Black heritage. For Black History does not, or rather should not, exist as a thing apart. When Black History is severed from other history and fetishised, it speaks only to a narrow nationalism and distorts the nature of the very contribution it purports to celebrate.

The kind of history that the IRR has been at pains to record – in articles, booklets, local histories, exhibitions, films, a CD Rom and now this DVD – relates to the movements that Black people have created for equality and justice. Such movements have not only transformed communities and localities in the UK but also institutions such as the churches and trades unions, movements such as that for women's rights or self-help and, indeed, concepts such as community safety or police accountability.

Black people may initially have needed to band together to counter discrimination or to meet a need not met by statutory agencies. But the effect has often been to extend rights and freedoms for all. And the story of how that transformation happened – be it in schooling, at the workplace, over social welfare, in the media – is rarely told. Despite the fact that so many other social movements owe a debt to the Black movements of the 1950s and 1960s, when British history is written, it invariably ignores the contribution that Black people have made, especially to social transformation.

Today, when the UK can, because of those very struggles for justice pursued by previous generations, claim to be multicultural and

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is looked to for inspiration by ethnic minority groups across Europe, it is important to tell the story of how that came about. The four films, *Struggles for Black Community*, made for Channel 4 TV at the beginning of the 1980s, chart the milestones in Black people's fight for justice – 'race riots' in Cardiff in post-war 1919, Notting Hill in 1958, Powell and the numbers game, the strike at Imperial Typewriters, the death of anti-fascist Blair Peach. They reveal in these histories 'from below' how unities across communities were forged so that Black became a political colour, not the colour of one's skin. They reveal the ways in which racism has changed over time, in its forms and in its victims. And they show how state institutions have been forced to move in response to challenges from movements and communities.

It is the descendants of the Black settlers of the 20th century (the makers of this history) who now seek out this hidden history to make sense of the harsh world their parents rarely talk about. And it is for them and the young people now afforded through the Citizenship and History curriculums a chance to discuss these social struggles (as opposed to merely celebrating a politically empty cultural diversity) that we have decided to re-master and reissue these films made over twenty-five years ago. (Their uniqueness is discussed in the director's notes below.)

They do not need an expert to introduce them into a formal or informal educational or training setting. But we suggest that they be used in conjunction with the other materials in a similar vein the IRR has produced on racism and Black struggles for justice in the UK. See inside back cover.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

A series of four documentary films – DVD, colour, approx 38 minutes each.

In 1982, when these films were made, if the British media were to be believed, Black people were always being done to, never doing; their experiences were portrayed as fragmented or individualised, their divisions inherent. These films gave the lie to that historiography by recording the unity and continuity of Black struggle in Britain and the richness and variety of Black resistance. In the community and the workplace, as a people and a class, African-Caribbeans and Asians had come together in different ways at different periods to carry on a common struggle which involved old and young, women and men, seamen, industrial workers and the unemployed.

Each film portrays the history and strength of one particular area – Cardiff, Southall, Ladbroke Grove, Leicester – and emphasises a particular aspect of historical Black struggle. But the films also complement each other – so that the series contributes to building a coherent history of Black people in British communities from the nineteenth into the twentieth century.

Commissioned by Channel 4 TV in its radical heyday, the filmmakers were guided by the principle of taking testimony only from participant activists – with no use of any authorial or commentary voice-over. So the spare film narratives employ interviews supported by photographic and archival material – with minimal on-screen contextualising text.



Camera – Peter Chappell; Sound – Albert Bailey; Editor – Brand Thumim;
Researchers – Cecil Gutzmore, Harry Joshua, Pratibha Parmar, Harsh Punja;
Series Adviser – A. Sivanandan; Producer – Margaret Henry; Director – Colin Prescod.
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TIGER BAY IS MY HOME

A film on Cardiff

“We fought to keep this country great. We have spilt blood for this country. 1939 to 1945 the docks was like something in ancient Egypt – one of every family were killed, torpedoed. Young, Black, at 14 years of age, torpedoed three times. 16, 18 years of age, going on the first sortie over Germany, some lost. Going to Canada – trained to be pilots or whatever. This is what people like the National Front come and tell me – ‘we fought to keep this country great’. I don’t have to mention the King’s African Rifles or the Gurkhas. What I mention is the contribution made by this area to that struggle. We didn’t fight fascism on a beach called Dunkirk. We didn’t fight fascism in Berlin. What we fought it was here and throughout. I mean the number of Arab seamen, Somali seamen, West African seamen that went down, that had no families. Their names can’t be recorded. But people who had families – one in every family was lost.”

KEITH ‘NINO’ ABDI

TIGER BAY IS MY HOME, made in Butetown aka Tiger Bay, Cardiff,



shows that Black community in Britain has been developing at least since the 1850s. Whereas in the 20th century the ‘new’ communities were made up of Black industrial and service labour, in the 19th century in Cardiff, as in other port towns and cities like Liverpool and South Shields, they began with Black colonial seamen. The Tiger Bay community faced official, as well as everyday physical harassment, which culminated in race riots in 1919 and a scheme for repatriation. But the community stood its ground, and so the people of Butetown lived through the Depression of the 1930s, and many of them served and died in World War Two. They once stood alone as an isolated minority, but as of the 1950s they came to share the broader experience of the newer Black communities.



Approx. 38 minutes

Contributors include: Keith “Nino” Abdi; Gaynor Legall; Abdi Noor; Ella Romaine; Beatrice Sinclair; Kenneth Trotman; Olwen Watkins; Rosetta Williams; Harry Joshua.

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A TOWN UNDER SIEGE

A film on Southall



“I can remember distinctly the 23rd of April (1979) because on that day some people, I will call them trouble-makers, they were coming for a meeting into Southall. And by all means we all wanted to stop that meeting – went to

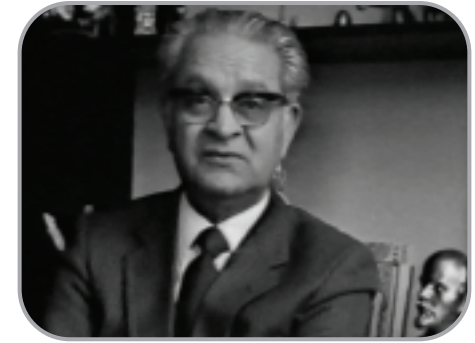
Ealing (Town Hall) to say please don't hold that meeting in Southall, because that won't be good for the Southall community. But nobody was listening to us, so the meeting was happening there. And the police all the time they were protecting the few skinheads or whatever. All the back streets were filled with police horses, and police dogs, and police vans. Southall was like a wartime state or something like that.”

LAKHBIR BAINS

A TOWN UNDER SIEGE looks at Southall, one of the major post – World War Two Asian centres in Britain, and focuses on how this community organised to resist racist and fascist attacks between 1976 and 1981. Southall's militancy had been initiated by community organisations of the 1950s, created to help Black workers combat racism at the workplace as well as to deal with discrimina-

tion in the community. And as state racism increased – into areas of immigration control and virginity testing, the 'bussing' of schoolchildren, 'overcrowding notices' in housing, harassment by the police – the community fashioned and forged new weapons of struggle. It

was during one of this same community's historic moments of defending itself against organised fascists and police humiliation that the young New Zealander, teacher and anti-racist Blair Peach was killed in 1979.



Approx 38 minutes

Contributors include; Mohamed Asghar; Lakhbir Bains; Suresh Grover; Temba Jamal; Kamaljeet Janda; Pragna Patel; Balraj Purewal; Geraldine Registe; Anita Sharda; Vishnu Sharma; Abeda Vora.
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FROM YOU WERE BLACK, YOU WERE OUT

A film on Ladbroke Grove



“It was unheard of to see a coloured man as a motor mechanic, a bus conductor, any one of these light trades – they couldn’t believe – and not only that, from you were Black, you were out – from you are Black, you are out. And that was what it is and it is still the same today. They never seem to see the Black people as a stern business man, a manager of any production. They never see him as a foreman. They always

seem to see him as one who is prepared to use the broom all his life.”

‘BARON’ BAKER

FROM YOU WERE BLACK, YOU WERE OUT is how one of the ‘founders’ of the Ladbroke Grove/Notting Hill Black community describes the Black condition in the 1950s. ‘No Irish, No Coloured, No dogs’, read the rooms-to-let signs in what had been, for decades, a decaying inner area of London. And so it was in the Grove that Black people had to face the brunt of a crude and brutal racism – and it was there that grassroots defence, organised against White racist mob attacks in 1958, developed into more general community resistance. And that strength was reflected in

the emergence, locally, of a number of major ‘Black Power’ organisations. As of the 1960s the vital sense of Black community which had developed in the Grove resisted attempts to displace the annual Caribbean Carnival which had begun to take on the proportions of Europe’s largest and most exciting street festival. Fittingly the unifying, recreational Carnival was ‘here to stay’ in the very streets where the community had fought off the fascists in 1958.



Approx. 38 minutes

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A COMMON HISTORY

A film on Leicester



“Most of the Asian workers in the West Midlands area and particularly the Black Country area worked in the foundries. Mostly they worked on the hot, dirty and very hard jobs, and very low paid jobs – casting, knock out, and on the floors, furnace men, or very heavy moulding machines. The high paid jobs, like maintenance workers or piece worker, always belonged to the White workers.”

“Asian workers received either no support from the White workers, or very little support – and very little support from the trade union officials. Whereas industrial action went into farther than work-to-rule, stoppages, into strike action, then the trade union official hesitated to make these strikes official, and this resulted in the wholesale sacking of Asian workers at several places in the Black Country.”

AVTAR SINGH JOUHL

A COMMON HISTORY underlines the fact that the ‘new’ Black communities consisted of workers from different ex-colonial countries in Asia and the Caribbean – joined in the same struggles against

racism in Britain since World War Two. This film, the most challenging in production terms of the four films in the series, focuses on discrimination in employment against Black workers. It looks particularly at the dispute at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester, in 1974. Here Black work-

ers faced opposition not only from the bosses, but also from some trades unions as well as fellow White workers. And the film demonstrates that the outrage of young Black people (many born here), as seen throughout Britain in the dramatic events of the widespread urban uprisings of Summer 1981, was related to the disappointed hopes of their migrant-worker parents.



Approx 38 minutes

Contributors include: ‘Balunda’; Avtar Brah; Vidya Purkush Hansrani; Donna Jackman; Avtar Singh Jouhl; Carole Leeming; Chunilal Parmar; Ajit Singh Sandu; Wolde Selassie.

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THE INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (IRR)

The IRR is an educational charity which carries out research and publishing and disseminates materials on racism in Britain, Europe and internationally,

Materials available from the Institute of Race Relations:

ON RACISM:

HomeBeats: struggles for racial Justice: a multimedia cd-rom

HomeBeats is a journey through time, from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia to the making of modern Britain. The first cd-rom on racism and the Black presence in Britain, it fuses music, graphics, video, text and animation to cover the history of the struggle for racial justice, tracing the connections between slavery, the colonial experience and modern day racism. The story of how Black communities were built in the UK is told through the stories of eight locations in Britain: Birmingham, Bradford, Brixton, the East End of London, Liverpool, Newham, Notting Hill and Southall. Soundtrack by Asian Dub Foundation. ■ £50 - cd-rom with single-user licence and study pack / £100 - cd-rom with multi-user school licence and study pack.

Roots of Racism

Covers Europe's early contacts with Black people and the factors that fuelled the original drive for conquest. From the initial dominance of the Spanish and Portuguese, it traces the establishment of a worldwide colonial system and how that in turn fed Europe's economic development – in particular through the industrial revolution. Examines the slave trade and the genesis of modern racism. ■ £3.50

Patterns of Racism

Traces the different ways that racism and colonialism have developed in various parts of the world and how and why they took on particular forms. Bringing the story up to the twentieth century, it covers North America, Australia and New Zealand, Southern Africa, Latin America, the West Indies and India. It concludes by looking at the type of racist culture that has been fostered by colonialism and imperialism. ■ £3.50

How Racism Came to Britain

The first cartoon book on racism in Britain, it is highly readable, serious – yet entertaining – and is especially suitable for young people. It examines the origins of racism in slavery and colonialism and shows how it affects Black people in every aspect of their lives in Britain today – in immigration control, employment, housing, education, policing and law enforcement, and the media. ■ £3.50

ON BLACK HISTORY:

From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean struggles in Britain by A. Sivanandan

Chronicles and analyses the hitherto unrecorded history of Black people in Britain since the Second World War. ■ £1.50

Newham: the forging of a black community by Campaign Against Racism & Fascism and Newham Monitoring Project

Situates the growth of Newham's working-class Black community in the context of industrial development and decline around London's docks. Black people – Asian and African-Caribbean – tell of the struggles they forged over discrimination in housing, at work, in education; tell how fighting crude racial violence brought them together in a community of resistance. ■ £3.50

Southall: the birth of a black community by Campaign Against Racism & Fascism

On 23 April 1979, a whole community took to the streets to protest at the invasion of its town by the fascists. What were the struggles and experiences of the people of Southall – in work, housing, schools and in their community – that had prepared the way for such a show of common purpose? ■ £3.50

Downloadable teaching materials

From mid-2009, a downloadable teaching resource based on our Black History Collection of materials from the 1950s to 1980s will be available free from the Institute website, www.irr.org.uk.



K HEROES

alter Rodney

**Institute of Race Relations
2-6 Leeke Street
London
WC1X 9HS**

**Tel: + 44 (0) 20 7837 0041
Fax: + 44 (0) 20 7278 0623
Web: www.irr.org.uk
Email: info@irr.org.uk**