James Baldwin and Britain Project

Leila Hassan Howe interviewed by Rob Waters, recorded on the 21st of July 2025, London.

A note on the text: false starts, filler words and non-lexical utterances (e.g. 'um', 'hmm') have not been transcribed. Time codes appear at ten-minute intervals in square brackets in bold type.

RW: Okay, so Leila Hassan Howe is an editor and activist, in the early 1970s she was a member of the Black Unity and Freedom Party. A founding member of the Race Today Collective in 1973, she later became editor of the radical journal *Race Today*. She was one of the organisers of the Black People's Day of Action in 1981. In 2019 she co-edited *Here to Stay, Here to Fight,* which is an anthology of *Race Today* articles and editorials. She's currently Chair of The Darcus Howe Legacy Collective.

Welcome Leila.

LH-H: Thank you.

RW: So, we're going to begin just by talking a little bit about your background growing up and then move on to talking about Baldwin afterwards. So, could we start with when and where you were born, and where you grew up?

LH-H: Yeah, certainly. I was born in Poplar in East London. My father was a Zanzibari seaman who had then established his own business as a butcher, Halal butcher, and my mother was an East End working class girl, and at that time worked in a chemist. And I grew up partly with my father, because my parents separated, and then my father, when I was, I'd say maybe around before I went to secondary school, about ten, told me that he was taking me back to live in Zanzibar, as it was then, now Tanzania, mainly because, in discussions we'd had, I'd talked about boyfriends, and he, as a devout Muslim, as he later became, said he could not think that his daughter was going to grow up as an English girl.

And so he took me to, against my mother's wishes, I think I had a period in care as well, but definitely against my mother's wishes, took me to live in Zanzibar in the early sixties.

RW: Do you remember which year it would have been more specifically?

LH-H: I think it's going to be '61, '62, but I can check. Definitely, yeah, because I was there for Tanzanian independence, so that would be my marker, I was there for when, and Zanzibar getting independence from the British, I was there for all of that changeover of colonial power and what it meant to live in Africa at that time.

I would say that my father, though, because he had established a base for Africans, particularly East African, students in this country, when we travelled, we travelled through Europe, through Alexandra to Cairo, where there were huge celebrations with Gamal Abdel Nasser, and people again celebrating Africa's freedom. Through to Uganda, the Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and then finally Tanzania. So, for a young girl who had been brought up as really being, I would say, British, and almost, knowing I was a different

colour, because of how I was treated, but it was a complete eye-opener to me, to see this kind of structure and society in Africa, and to understand.

And my father, on the boat going over, had said to me, I'm going to tell you one thing, he called me Layla which is my Arabic name, everything you've been told about Africa and Africans isn't true. And of course, as I would find out later, that was absolutely the case.

RW: Do you remember how it felt going to through those spaces, through Egypt and…?

LH-H: No, well first of all a lot of it was on a river boat, I went on a river boat down the River Nile. All of this now, when I look back, I just think, as a young girl, to me it was just all amazing. It was almost like a film, when I think about it now. But I remember in Egypt at that time, because of the relationship that countries who were being part of a big Pan-African movement, I just remember the kind of strength of feeling and emotion around Gamal Abdel Nasser at the time, of people who really wanted their freedom, and freedom from the British. And that, I was trying to understand, it was very confusing to me, that these people who were just so strong in their beliefs. Of course, I would later think about my father, and my father's life, and realise he was a Pan-Africanist. He never ever stopped his understanding of Africa and the freedom of Africa, but we didn't ever have political discussions, me and my dad. For me and my dad it was more about his desire to make me understand Islam and be a Muslim.

RW: And what was it like adjusting to life in Zanzibar?

LH-H: Well, again, I look back now, I had come from relative very ordinary working class life. My father, because he had looked after what was now the kind of ruling middle class in Zanzibar, the family that asked to look after me as a Muslim girl, were one of the wealthiest families on the island. So I have five servants, I had someone who ironed my clothes, did the cleaning, cooked my food, made my bed. I was catapulted into, almost a society that I understood nothing about. The strands through it all, though, was Islam, I wore purdah, I was put into purdah, of course, the minute I menstruated I had to go into purdah. And sometimes I think maybe that's my perspective, I always felt that I was looking out, I never felt I was part of it. I kind of adopted the customs, and understood, and in the meantime my mum is sending me from England, by post, Cliff Richard records, Elvis Presley records, talking to me about the family in England. So I was kind of in two worlds.

But again, I suppose, the instinct of being a child, I just adapted very well, I became this very, you know, a girl living in ruling class society in Zanzibar, but the one thing, there again, that ran through, which I think has stayed with me was the politics. At that time, all the debate was, what structure were the British going to leave in place when they left Zanzibar, the privy council, who were going to have the jobs, I of course was within a society where they were destined to take some of the ministerial and government

jobs, but all of it was about getting the British out of Africa, that I remember clearly. We would all gather by a radio at six o'clock every evening to listen to American and British news, the radio was our kind of conduit to the world. So, the whole family would sit by the radio and just listen to news from England and America, so we understood about what was going on with the Civil Rights Movement, with Kennedy, all of that.

So, I grew up in a kind of political atmosphere, I mean, politics, from very, very young age, I understood about power politics, freedom, what was needed. I understood that. But because of living with a ruling class family, when the Revolution happened in Zanzibar, which I think is '64, my life was at risk because this was the Africans with the support of Africans from the mainland, overthrowing who the British had left in power, which were the Arab ruling class. And so we had to leave the very, very large house in which we lived, we had to go and live in a smaller house, and at that time there was quite a lot of violence, I mean, I saw people being shot when I looked out of the window, that we were all in fear, as young women, of being raped.

And I have to say I never left the prayer mat. I smile now when I think about it, but all I did was pray to God to get me out of this situation. I think we all did, we were all in a state of terror. And again, the radio was our conduit to the world. And we would hear the revolutionary guard, as they were called, making announcements to say they were going to different areas, and knowing who'd been shot and who'd been killed. And we were getting messages to say that a family we knew had been put in jeopardy or had been shot. So, I lived through a period of terror, but I can visualise myself now in that small room with a prayer mat, just praying to God, please get me out of this.

RW: And was your father there, in that house as well?

LH-H: No, my father wasn't, my father lived elsewhere. I was living in a household of an Arab family, who, we'd gone to a smaller house to live in, and we were receiving news. But no, and then I was told that there were people to see me when I went. It was young African men with rifles, and they said I had to go to the Revolutionary Council, which was held in the sports arena. And I thought, well this is it, my life is over. And they took me to this sports arena, and they had a telegram, and they said, you have to explain this. And then, again, because of my father, they said, do you know who's daughter she is? And so they brought my father, and my father explained the, the telegram was from my mum saying, you need to get on the last plane out of there, get on that plane, just get out. So they wanted to me explain because they were very nervous about any kind of communication, and my father explained that my mother was white and English, and that she had obviously arranged with the Foreign Office, to get me out of the country.

And my mother tells a story that when she went to the Foreign Office, to say, my daughter's in there, in this revolution, she's British, get her out, they

said, no, she went with her father, she's a Zanzibari we can't evacuate her like the British, but there's a last plane that's leaving, and if you pay we can get her a seat on that plane. And she went to all of my East End family, my aunts and my uncles and they all clubbed together and bought me a ticket on British Overseas Airways as it was called then, to pay for a ticket. And so that's how I was able to leave Zanzibar and come back to England in the sixties, in '64.

RW: Do you remember what it was like going back to, **[00:10:00]** did you remember anything much about the East End England that you'd left?

[

LH-H: No. Well, I knew I had aunties and uncles, I mean, the first thing was getting on a big plane, that British Overseas Airways, that was all quite exciting, I'd never been on a plane, 'cause my father had taken me overground to Zanzibar, so that was it. And my mum was at the airport, I remember her grabbing me and saying, I've got you now, which if you knew my mum, that's absolutely typical. But no, and then she explained she'd married and Englishman, a dock worker, he worked for Tate & Lyle, loading sugar, and I was going to live with them. They'd decorated my room with all Beatles wallpaper, and I was going to live this happy life in East London which turned out definitely not to be the case.

RW: Okay, could you tell me about that transition into living in the East End?

LH-H: Certainly, so I had come from Africa, I was really proud to be African. I felt very African, I certainly felt very religious as a Muslim girl. And I came into this environment, which, from the get go, I realised there was a hostility to people with a different colour skin. That was absolutely paramount in everybody's discussions at the time, why are these people coming here, they're coming to take our jobs, we don't want them here. I mean, that was just rife. My mother came from a very strong East End family called the Watsons, and they were quite an established East End family, as all East End families at the time, slightly living with a bit of crime.

I often say now, 'cause I've got one remaining uncle who's completely respectable, and I will say, Uncle George, I remember whenever I wanted a dress, I would go to Aunt Joanie's house, and she would open her sitting room door, and that's how we were clothed, it was all illegal, it was all stolen gear. And the stealing from the docks was huge, meat, other goods. So in that kind of atmosphere, and a very, very close family. They socialised together, they met each other every Friday and Saturday night. I mean, it was a strong, connected family, that I entered into, which again, looking back, I can see how that has been of great benefit to me, but they were very, very conscious of class.

So this consciousness of class of who they were as working class, proud to be working class, fighting for union recognition on the docks, that whole

class struggle with Jack Straw and some of these big union people, that would be a debate, at the same time as an anti-immigration debate.

So I grew up in that atmosphere, and that caused a huge conflict within me, a huge conflict. I remember sitting down and my mother would pull up my skirt, and say, you've got nice legs you need to show them. And I'd pull down my skirt and say, no, no, no, mum, it's wrong. And she would, you know, I went into complete conflict with my mother and step-father, it was conflict from day one. One on culture, on their attitude to race and understanding, but I went to a grammar school, obviously because I had had a colonial education in Zanzibar where most of my teachers were white, we were educated in English because it was a colonial structure.

So, I came back and they said, she goes straight into a grammar school, and the racism in that grammar school was just horrendous. There were three Black girls, and our lives were just made hell. Nobody would talk to us, we were ostracised at playtime, and so all this kind of churned within me, and we're going to talk about Baldwin, who for me, at that time, was my complete saviour, but for me, life at that home, nothing but conflict.

But because I'd got confidence, and I think partly, obviously from my mother, but because I understood where I'd come from, it was just constant rowing, fighting, arguing. I mean, my childhood in East London was not a very happy one.

RW: Was the rowing and fighting, is that with other children at the school or with the staff or…?

LH-H: Not so much at school. I wouldn't say so at school. At school it was teachers who felt I was bright and could be an East End girl that made it to university. So I got a lot of encouragement in that sense, this is a bright girl we need to nurture. But on the other hand, they had no control of their classes, and if anybody decided to get up and start having a go about these people coming into our country, taking our jobs, I didn't see them doing anything about it. And also, in the playground, I suppose because we were a minority, this whole thing of bullying which is paramount now, none of that was around when I was in…if you were bullied, you were bullied, you know, you had to hold your own.

And so I said to my mother, mum I need to leave school, I can't stay in this environment. And she just said Leila it's not what you know in this society, it's who you know. We're working class people, we don't know anyone. If you're not going to stay at school, you've got to get a job. So I went and got my first job at 16. I said, I'd rather go to work mum, than be putting up with all of this at school, 'cause I was having conflict at school, and then I'd come home and hear my stepfather saying these really vile, racist things about the struggle in Southern Africa. I mean, you must think, in those days, the news was quite important to all of us. I mean, we all sat down for the BBC Nine O'Clock News, and then that would trigger another big

argument about these African countries, and people coming to this country, and then of course, we've got, later on, Powell's speech.

So again, politics in those environments political talk was very, very strong, always. I didn't grow up, ever, in an apolitical atmosphere. Always, there was some discussion about what was going on in society, from Africa to the East End, I would say I've always been politically conscious, even if I didn't know it myself.

RW: Did you find yourself always at odds with your family in that respect or were there points at which you…?

LH-H: Oh, always. No, no, complete utter total, always at odds, always at odds. And of course, I look back now, I hated my step-father, mainly because of his racist views, which made it really difficult for my mother who was always trying to balance between the two of us.

I think it got to what point where my step-father told her she had to choose, and she told him that she would choose me. So he hated me. So the dislike grew even more then, because he realised that my mother was never going to let me go, having lost me to go to Africa.

So it was really, really difficult. And then socialising, they socialised in a pub called The Trossachs or the Princess Alexandra and they had a working men's club in which Black people weren't allowed, you know? We couldn't go. And later on, when I got my first boyfriend, an African guy from Sierra Leone, I went to go and meet my mum in the West End Working Men's Club and they wouldn't let us in, until somebody shouted out, that's Lily's daughter.

So they were socialising in a place that did not allow Black people to come in. So it was absolutely racially polarised and the hostility to Indians, to anybody of a different culture, it was just horrendous. The dislike and the hatred, and of course the superiority from colonialism even though they were working class. And at some times, I mean at odd points, my step father would say to me, because I would talk about Africa and politics, the people who oppressed you Leila are the people who are oppressing us as well. So that connection was there, but when it came to race, that all just got messed up. That understanding just wasn't there. Even though, deep down, they had an understanding of class and the structure of class, and a dislike of the ruling class. I mean, they had no time for royalty, I tell people, now what's going in society, I'm amused. The working class I grew up in, very little time for Christianity, they only went to church for weddings and funerals, and they thought the royal family was a joke, they didn't care. They were really, really class conscious, very, very class conscious.

RW: I'm just curious in terms of the religious aspect, did your commitment as a Muslim change…?

LH-H: Oh absolutely, yeah, it faded. I mean, I had no Muslim friends, I didn't go to the mosque. My dad, every now and then would send people from Tanzania, people from East Africa would visit me in my home. One of the jokes is that my mum got a long letter, and it was a proposal of marriage, and her first instinct was, have you ever met him? I said, no, mum, I haven't. What's he want to marry you for then? Bit by bit the Islam just faded. I had no Islamic community with which to operate in, no. And then, I think for me, race became more than religion, being somebody of colour. And now there's been the debate about colourism, but I tell them, when I grew up, if you had the slightest touch of Blackness in you, you were termed Black, there was no question about it.

RW: And how did that experience of race and racism shape your social relationships, like who you were making friends with or…?

LH-H: Yeah, so I went to work, and of course, not only did I want to leave school, but I wanted to leave home. So I made friends with some more middle class English girls, I would say, and we got a flat in Russell Square. So I went to live in a flat in Russell Square and, I'm not saying that middle class people aren't racist, but it wasn't in my face in the way that it was in East London, day in day out. So yeah, and I made friends with some nice white girls, and we all shared a flat together in Russell Square. I would go home regularly to the East End to get food and supplies, which my mother would do, of course, but I was able to leave home. So that was important. But then we did, that's what young people did then. As soon as you could you left home, for your own independence, got your own money. So, there was that.

The first job I got, I got through my aunty who was working **[00:20:00]** as a waitress in a pub in Chancery Lane, and again, in those days, the relationship between the ruling and middle class and working class people, so she would be their Rosie who served them, and they would ask Rosie about her life. And their Rosie said I've got a niece who needs a job. And so they said, okay, bring her up, yeah, we'll give her a job. I mean, it's that kind of network, if you know what I mean?

And so, I went to work in Chancery Lane at a solicitor's called Enever, Strong, Freeman & Guscott, I remember very well. And they said, yeah, we've got a job, bring her up, we'll give her a job bookkeeping. I went to work at bookkeeping and then after a few months my boss said, Leila, I don't think bookkeeping's for you, and I said, no. But by then, I had my confidence, so I applied for another job and went to work at the British Institute of Management. And one of the senior managers there said, you're bright, you're different, I think you can be more than just as a filing clerk, you're different, we need to encourage you.

So again, with his encouragement, I was sent on day release, again, something which doesn't happen now. But they paid for me to go and study, he just said, no Leila, you're not a filing clerk, we need to support you. So he sent me for day release, and I worked myself up into a kind of secretarial

position, which at that time in terms of structure in admin and clerical being a secretary was quite a high position. So I became a secretary there.

And my family admired me. My East End family would be Leila's got a job across the water, you know? 'Cause in the East End then, you lived, you died, you were born, that was your society. Leila's got a job across the water, and she's got a good job you know? So my family then began to have a lot of respect for me, because I'd broken the mould and gone out of East London. So I became a secretary at the British Institute of Management, I think that was on, not Chancery Lane, the one next to it, it'll come to me. And then because I had never left my connection with Africa, I would buy *The Daily Telegraph* every day, because *The Telegraph* was the only newspaper that had any kind of international news. My mum was probably reading *The Daily Mirror*, I think, the columnist "Cassandra", *The Daily Mirror*, all of that was important to them. But for international news you had to read *The Telegraph*. And then one day in *The Daily Telegraph* I saw there was a job for being a secretary to the secretary at the Institute of Race Relations in Jermyn Street. So, I applied and got that job, and that's how I met Siva [Ambalavaner Sivanandan] and became involved in the whole fight for the Institute of Race Relations. But it was because, you know, as a young girl, 16 year old I would I be, maybe 17, 18, I was reading *The Daily Telegraph* and I was reading books, because that for me was the only way out of the kind of hell I was living in, to understand what was going on around me. So I began to read, and that's again, how I came across Baldwin, by this desire to read and to know and understand.

RW: So, what year would that be that you moved to the Institute of Race Relations?

LH-H: So the Institute of Race Relations is probably '68, '69. I can check the dates…

RW: You would have been around 20 years old?

LH-H: Yeah, in my twenties, yeah. And was I married then. I was 21, because I had got married. I married the guy from Sierra Leone, and my mother and everybody's aware, it was my escape out of East London. I had to get out and this guy, you know, lovely man, married, loved me, wanted me, that was all good. I can't say I was that interested, but to me this was my way out, to get out of that environment.

So I got married at 21, I was engaged at 18 and married at 21 and separated at 21. As my mother always used to say, you are the only person who's had an engagement longer than their marriage, which she would later talk about. But yes. But it wasn't to be, I knew it wasn't to be really. Not the way my thinking was going. And working at the Institute and with Siva, that whole development of how we began to think about, still the colonial struggles that were going on in Africa. I was gone from my marriage then, mentally I'd gone, yeah, in terms of what I had to do and where I had to be. Yeah.

RW: So what was your role at the Institute of Race Relations?

LH-H: So I worked for the secretary, a man called Mr Fletcher. And he was on the second floor, and the library at the Institute of Race Relations was on the first. So, in my lunch break, or whenever I had a break, I would go down to the library, and I would start to talk to Siva. And Siva was having, what I would call, the way he was developing the library in terms of making sure that the liberation struggles that were going on in Africa, the Black Panthers, *The Black Scholar*, all these Black journals that the library was going to be a place for those, side by side with all the very academic stuff about, you know, because the Institute at that time, was very much a colonial institution, but underneath Siva was developing a group of people who thought differently from those in charge

So I would go down in my lunch break, and he'd be having a discussion, there'd be some kind of conversation, either with people who were visiting the library and wanting to talk about what was going on in the world and in Britain. And again, that was kind of, to me, that's where I needed to be, in those kinds of discussions about what was going on in Mozambique, South Africa, the Black Panthers. I would go down and read the Black Panther newspaper, I would read *The Black Scholar*, all the journals that Siva was getting in from the Chicanos, from you know, all the different liberation movements, from Palestine, I would be reading those. And then there would be discussion all the time and of course the discussion was around what the colonial structure of the institute was that was actually ruling us, and the tension that was going on between us and that structure.

So, I was part of all of that, you know, the radical researcher Robin [Jenkins] who came in, I've forgotten his name, who came in and he wrote this in one of his research papers, if anybody comes from the Institute asking for research, you should tell them to fuck off. Then we had the *Race Today* cover which said, I think, 300,000 Africans say no to Goodman in Zimbabwe. All of that was causing trouble with the hierarchy, with the powers that be.

So then there were lots of discussions about how we could organise ourselves, pack the council, get members. And then I met people like Lou Kushnik, [Lee Bridges, Brian Cohen] a lot of the radical people then. So I was in a kind of hot-bed of radical discussion around race, and around society really.

RW: So who would be at those discussions, I mean some of these people like Lou Kushnick, was it Robin Jenkins, was that his name?

LH-H: Yeah, Robin Jenkins, Lee Bridges, yes.

RW: And they would have been connected to *Race Today*, writing for *Race Today* at that time?

LH-H: They were writing, so Robin was definitely one of the researchers. They'd come from Sussex, which had been a hot-bed of radical activity. But Lou Kushnick, they were people who came to the Institute, because they were interested in what the Institute was doing, and the discussion about race and race in Britain and how it was developing.

So we would have all these discussions with different people. I stayed in Lou Kushnick's house in Manchester many times, I remember it all. It was very kind of organic, the kind of discussions we were having.

RW: So were they organised seminars, or were they just spontaneous?

LH-H: No, no, a lot of it was spontaneous, a lot of it was informal, a lot of it at that time, was, so Siva with the librarians there, Hazel, Roz, Jenny Bourne of course, came later. There would be these discussions, but then as we decided more that we had to do something about the structure, then they became more formalised. And of course, none of this is with Zoom or whatever, this is all, you have to do it face to face, or on the telephone. So they became much more formal, the kind of planning of what we were going to do, became much more organised

RW: And who was using the library, was it bringing in…?

LH-H: So the library at the time, I would say was mainly students. University students mainly. But because word got around in the Black community that Siva was getting in all these radical journals, a lot of Black organisations were coming in. So that's how I met the Black Unity and Freedom Party, that's how I first met Darcus [Howe]. Darcus came to the Institute of Race Relations to do some research, just after the Mangrove Trial and Darcus said, I've come in to do some research. So, people from the radical Black movements had got an understanding of what Siva was doing, and so they were coming into the institute to read the magazines, to have discussions. I met Tony Soares from the Black Liberation Front there, I met a lot of activists there, from Britain, people who were coming to the Institute to read the journals and to have discussions.

RW: So if there was so many people coming, I'm curious, also, what drew you to the Black Unity and Freedom Party specifically?

LH-H: Chance. Complete chance. They invited me to a meeting, I came downstairs once, Siva was there, and said this is brother Dawkins and another brother from the Black Unity and Freedom Party. They looked at me, and probably thought, she's nice, let's invite her to a meeting. And they invited me to a meeting. I've said to everybody if The Panthers had invited me, if The Liberation Front had invited me, I would have gone. But they said to me, we have these meetings in South East London, why don't you come down to one of our meetings? And so that's how I became involved with the Black Unity and Freedom Party.

There was no ideological choice, I tell everybody, absolutely not, they invited me and so I went.

RW: Was there much co-operation between those groups at that time?

LH-H: So at that time, I would say we had, what we thought were ideological differences but were they really? Of course they weren't. But the Black Unity and Freedom Party was a Maoist organisation, so I had my *Little Red Book*, I knew about the *PRAIRIE FIRE*, I knew a lot about the Vietnam War. That, of course, had been key to a lot of, as you're aware, of radical movements at that time. So they said they were Marxist-Leninist. Did I know who Marx was? No. Did I know who Lenin was? No. But I knew I belonged to BUFP which was a Marxist-Leninist. So our leaders, so I always say to people about the Black movement, **[00:30:00]** you have to understand, the gap between the leadership, pseudo intellectuals, people like Ricky Cambridge, George Joseph, and the mass of the rank and file which I joined, which were huge numbers, I mean any meeting BUFP had would attract up to 100 people. But the gap between them and their ideology and their different Trotskyists and not Trotskyists, and us, the rank and file, who just wanted equal rights and justice for Black people was huge.

And so we would be invited to these seminars, where they would talk, what I would say, is utter garbage now, when I look back, absolutely unrelatable to me. We were told about people who were being hung from lampposts, and why we couldn't be Trotskyists and all of this. Did any of us understand it, did any of us care? Absolutely not. But our leaders were involved in that kind of discussion.

Panthers were a much bigger mass movement as well. Obviously, the name attracted people. All of the Black organisations adopted the ten point programme of the Black Panthers, regardless of our ideology, BLF, BUFP, The Panthers, the different organisations up and down the country, all of us had the ten point programme of The Panthers.

So for the rank and file, the ideology that moved us was the ideology of the Black Panthers. For the leadership, who wanted to debate in pseudo-Marxist and Leninism discussions, they thought that was all very important, but the gap between the two was huge, I can tell you.

RW: And what did you do with the BUFP?

LH-H: So, with the BUFP I joined the editorial board, so *Black Voice*, we produced a weekly paper, all of which was self-funded. I mean there were no grants at that time. And part of your commitment as a cadre in the BUFP was you had to sell 100 newspapers a week. So one of our big activities, me and my friend Jean, and other young ladies, would go all in our African clothes, and we'd stand at the corner of Shepherd's Bush Market, Brixton Market, Dalston Market, and we would engage passers-by in discussion about why, as young Black people, we had to make change in society?

So that was like a big part, because you were mandated to do it. At that time I was living with another person, and he'd say, what have you got there? And it would be my bag of *Black Voice*, which I had made a commitment that I would be selling. So I would have to get out every Saturday and engage people and talk to people about what was going and they'd say, you're going to get yourself in trouble, you know, and be careful So *Black Voice* was huge, and then discussions about what *Black Voice* should contain. The fight against police brutality, all the cases that we knew, we were heavily involved in campaigns in terms of what we had to do about police brutality.

We had a Saturday School, I mean I taught in the Saturday School, I'd left school with no qualifications, but never mind, I was in a Saturday School, we set up our Saturday Schools, because at that time, that whole discussion about what was happening to Black children in schools was important. But again from The Panthers, so we set up a Saturday School, so I would go, when I wasn't selling the papers, I'd be teaching in somebody's house in Peckham or New Cross, which is where BUFP was based.

And then we would have our weekly well, I think they were, political discussions, where we'd have to go and discuss politics.

So that was the kind of atmosphere. And I was in BUFP at 21, and most of the people I was with, were in their 17, 18, even younger, 16 some of them were at school, Jean was at school. Young, young people, just knowing that's what's going in this society had to change. And when I look back, I don't think our leadership served us very well, but we were all going for it. Yeah, we were going for it, we knew change had to happen, and we didn't care. And we were inspired by The Panthers, I tell everybody, the biggest inspiration for the Black movement in Britain was The Panthers.

RW: Are you talking about the US Panthers?

LH-H: The US Panthers.

RW: Right, yeah.

LH-H: The US Black Panthers. Absolutely without a doubt. But, you know, we had a study group as well, we had study classes taken by our leaders, so we would study *The Black Jacobins* in particular by C.L.R. James, Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. So we had study classes as well. So it was study, selling papers, discussion, but we would all, of our own time, go weekly down to South East London for our meetings, and to discuss what was going on nationally and internationally

RW: It must take up a huge amount of time?

LH-H: Oh no, it was our lives. No, it was our lives, but we didn't mind at that time, yeah.

I mean, when we look back, 'cause I still see some of my friends from BUFP, we look back, that was our life. We'd committed. But then, because so many of us were doing it, it was also fun, if you know what I mean? It was our social life as well. You know, we knew each other, some us were at school together, some related, some close friends and called each other brother and sister, and we were all part of it. And, as I say, because so many of us were doing it, we didn't mind. But no, it was completely. I mean, Tuesdays was probably meetings to discuss what was going on in the country, politics. Oh, and then we would invite people from overseas to speak, I've forgotten that, we would organise public meetings, so people from Frelimo, from the liberation movements, from Southern Africa, from, then the Pan-African movement in Southern Africa was huge, so we would invite speaker from that. And then our leaders would be having political debates about what faction in Southern African politics they were supporting, what faction in this. They would be doing that, we weren't part of that. But yes, we would have these meetings, so speakers from the USA would come over, debate, discussion, you know? Making us develop, in a way, what we were thinking.

RW: And your role with *Black Voice*, were you writing for that, or were you…?

LH-H: So I was writing for that. I was definitely on the editorial board, I think partly 'cause of my connection with the Institute, definitely writing for that, discussing what the articles should be. I'm thinking now, that's when I started my public speaking. I think then also it was, I don't know how I came to speak at a meeting, but once I did that, then it was Sister Leila's a good speaker, so we'll get Sister Leila to speak. So I think that's when I first started to speak publicly about issues.

But when I look back now, life was picket lines, meetings, selling the newspaper, but we were all young, we didn't care. I mean, that was our activity.

And then, because of the culture at the time, a huge party culture, so it wasn't one of, I don't want to say left wing commitment and moralising, we were partying. I mean, we were partying, Friday night, Saturday night, all of us were in parties, house parties, Blues parties, whatever. We had a huge social life as well.

RW: These weren't hosted by the organisations, it was just…?

LH-H: No, these were just our own connections within the various Black communities, friends, family's word of mouth

RW: Adjacent.

LH-H: And because the community had a much more community feel at that time, even if you didn't know you would hear, oh so and so's having a house party, come along. And they would sell drink of course, and so you'd buy

your drinks, so they were making money, they didn't mind. But there would always be, I mean, just every weekend, you would be at a party, without a doubt.

RW: And there was a kind of political element to that as well? 'cause Jah Shaka But that was…

LH-H: Yeah, all the sound systems, constant, all of them were giving us revolutionary messages. Oh no, at that time, being Black, being proud, being beautiful, what was going on in Southern Africa, of course, because of the huge Rasta influence in the sound systems, that whole culture of who we are as Black people, that was all being blared out of the sound systems. Oh no, that was very much part of the whole Black political culture at that time. Our partying was part and parcel of that, it wasn't separate, the music we were listening to, yeah, most definitely.

RW: Could you tell me about how you became involved in *Race Today* as a publication?

LH-H: Sure. So, *Race Today*, I became involved with 'cause I was in The Institute of Race Relations. So Siva took me out of, after we had our palace coup, Siva took me out of being secretary to the secretary and put me in the Information Department, with a lady called Hilary Arnott who's mother was Dame Elsie Arnott. So The Institute was really a colonial ruling class structure. So I worked with Hilary, in the Information Department, and our job was file cutting from an agency on the subject of race from every single British newspaper, local and national, every single newspaper that mentioned race, so my job was to file under categories, either police, education, health and housing, cuttings, so that if a researcher came in and said, I'm interested in health issues in the Black community or the Asian community, I would then point them to where they could go.

But that, again, gave me a huge insight to what was going on in the country, because I read every single newspaper cutting so I knew what was going on, and I could see the theory of victims who were poor, Black helpless victims, who didn't know anything, had no culture, needed help, mainly perpetrated by the church and charities, to, we are trouble-makers all they want to cause violence to be here, anti-Black. There were the two positions, there was no in between position. And I got that from reading the papers.

So, Siva put me in the information department, with Hilary Arnott, and then with the palace coup and inviting Darcus to be the editor of *Race Today*, they then promoted me to being Darcus' assistant editor. That's how it happened. There was no kind of overall commitment or understanding of journal production you're there at the point in history where change is required, and you're the person who's going to be part of that change. So that's how I became Assistant Editor, Darcus was told Leila's going to be your Assistant Editor. So yeah, which he didn't mind.

RW: Could you describe for me, what the palace coup involved, and what it was like living through that or being part of it?

LH-H: Yeah, so we had decided that the council of The Institute, which was made up of Lonrho, Booker Bros and McConnell, Unilever, and people who owned diamond mines in Southern Africa, leading Lords and Lady figures, you know, ruling class figures, who had a **[00:40:00]** very patronising attitude to race, the colonial structure that ran the institute who wanted Robin out, who didn't like the direction the Editor of Race Today. Sandy Kirby, who was the priest who was taking *Race Today* in a more radical direction everything was becoming a battle, that we had to depose them. And so we packed the membership. Anybody who visited The Institute to do research, we would talk to them and say, we're involved in this fight, would you become a member?

So we packed the membership, because at that time that was the structure of The Institute, it had a membership and it had a council. And so we packed the membership over a period of months, getting people to sign up and be members. And then finally, when they were meeting, I remember, we charged upstairs, and we basically told them that their time was over. I mean, now when I look back, I remember me standing up there and I think Siva always says he remembers me standing up with my bum in one of these Lord and Ladies' faces, saying, it's all over, we're taking over now. And we've packed the membership and voted you out you're now deposed. And so that's what we did. We deposed the Council

Of course, that meant that the mega-money that was coming into The Institute dried up, so we moved from Jermyn Street, really, I mean gorgeous, beautiful building in Picadilly to Leeke Street in Pentonville, Islington. And we had to physically move, because there was no way…but by then Siva and other people had been talking to the World Council of Churches, and so we knew there was alternative funding, if not as much, as these big capitalists could give us. So we knew that it would have a life. Because of the whole kind of liberation theology that was going on in South Africa and South America were very interested in what we wanted to say and do, but so were the World Council of Churches and the British Council of Churches So with their support, we were able to physically move because once that big capitalist money dried up, we could not afford to live in Jermyn Street.

But it was over a period of months of persuading people that to pack the membership to, when the council meeting came we just went up there, and basically told them, it's all over.

RW: And it had been planned for that event?

LH-H: Yeah, for that event, yes. And they were all sitting there, you know, the wealthy and the wise, and Lords and Ladies of the country, like, what, you know?

RW: How did they react, how did they take…?

LH-H: Well, astounded. I think they did not know that we were building up this momentum. I mean, we'd kept it really low key it was all hush, hush, we were really planning a coup, we were. So, they had no idea, they knew that there were rumblings, and some of the more patronising people within The Institute, like E.J.B Rose and people, they kind of understood, but, you know, they can't quit believe that we would oust them. So they were astounded that we did it. And then of course, that Institute just disintegrated.

RW: And *Race Today*, moved to Leeke Street as well or did they stay…?

LH-H: Yeah, no *Race Today* moved to Leeke street, off Pentonville Road. And then they changed the council and that's when they invited John La Rose, Wilfred Wood and radical people within the Black community to be on the council. And then they said that *Race Today* had to have a Black editor. And there were three people they had in mind, Ron Philips, Gus' elder brother, Hal Austin who was a journalist and Darcus Howe. And then invited each of them to come in and had a chat, and Darcus said, the only way I'll come for an interview is if I get the job, you're not interviewing me and I'm not getting the job. And that's how it happened.

RW: And how did you end up being the, was it Deputy Editor?

LH-H: Yeah, assistant, so I was on the panel that interviewed Darcus, so I was one of the people who interviewed him for the job, which he was getting, it was hilarious really. But that's another story. So we did a proper interview process, and then as he said, I'm not going to be interviewed, unless I get the job, so he went through the interview and got the job.

And then *Race Today* had its own structure upstairs, Leeke Street, so it was going to be myself, Darcus, a young woman called Lorine Burt. And at that point, a radical guy called Dave Clark, who Darcus renamed Dave Clark Singh, because he did all of the research into what was going on with Asian workers' movements up and down the country. But Dave Clarke had his own magazine called *The Leveller*, so Dave was a radical white journalist, a radical person, and he was Darcus' lead journalist I would say, and I was the token assistant editor, I'd never edited in my life, knew nothing about it, but hey ho.

And Lorine was going to be the person who did a lot of the production, and Darcus would crack lots of jokes about what he had to inherit. But in his mind, of course, he knew, he was going to create a radical Black journal, he knew that. He went along with being the editor of *Race Today*, but in his mind, and in discussion with C.L.R. James, Selma James, Richard Small and others who Darcus was very, very close to, Darcus knew that he had to take this even further into the community, and it had to be the voice of the community rather than be a kind of institution that just reported on issues. But yeah, so I became his assistant editor.

RW: And *Race Today* is rising at that point, a lot of the Black press, I suppose Black Voice continued for quite a lot longer?

LH-H: Yes, all of that continued, yeah, yeah. I mean, I left the Black Unity and Freedom Party, that was a lot of conflict for Darcus, some of the leadership of the Panthers did not like the fact that Darcus had moved to *Race Today* at all. They thought he'd sold out. So, there was a lot of conflict about, what is Darcus doing with *Race Today*? Has he sold out, you know? That's what you used to call it in those days. Selling out. So a lot of conflict, a lot of unhappiness. And then I'd left BUFP, mainly because Darcus spent a lot of time talking to me, and I always say how he hoodwinked me, because he began to introduce the subject of women's liberation and had I thought about it? We'd been to a few women's lib conferences in BUFP but they were so white and middle class, we felt there was no place for us there at all. Their reality was not our reality at all. And later I joined part of the Black Women's Group with Olive [Morris] as well.

But he began to talk to me about what the Black community needed, and how none of us in our Black power groups had sat down and seriously analysed what stage the Black community was in in relation to society in the UK. I mean, Darcus in terms of intellectually and analysis I mean he was just streets ahead. And of course, as a young woman, this was very impressive, that someone is talking in this way. So, I was kind, oh no…even *Black Voice*, we never ever spoke about who we were as a Black community, it was Frelimo, it was this, it was that. But that discussion of where we'd come from, the colonial movement that had shaped us, we did not have those in-depth discussions about us and our development in the UK

So Darcus was the first person who introduced, let's talk about us and who we are, primarily, let's have an understanding of that, before we take any steps to have a struggle. So yeah, so that was, he had worked out in his own mind. And for a while he played along with editing *Race Today* under Siva. Siva, at that time, and I've recorded it in interviews I've done with Robin and Paul, so I don't mind saying it, Siva was very much about Black people being oppressed and that we were victims who needed support and help and encouragement, and that we were being victimised by society. Whereas Darcus began to introduce this thing of, no, no, no, if you really examine what we're doing and how we're doing it, we've become protagonists, and that's what the Black Power movement was about, our shift from accepting what Britain had thought we were, to us saying to her, this is who we are.

And I understood that, because being in Black Power, I'd understood that we were very much trying to say, this is who we are, even though we hadn't really got an ideological basis to understand. So, I think Darcus introduced that, and knew then, that, and Siva, because of Siva's personality, wanted to control what *Race Today* was doing as well, he wasn't content to let Darcus run away with it, he wanted to know what was going on. And it just

became untenable. So that's why in the still of the night, one night, Marla Dhondy [née Sen] and Farrukh Dhondy lent us their post office van, and we just physically packed up and moved out, and went to a squat in Brixton.

RW: Do you remember what year that was, or how old…?

LH-H: So that would have been '74.

RW: So it was quite a short amount of time after the…?

LH-H: Oh yeah, we didn't stay long, no, we didn't stay long. He knew. But I knew, I know now, I didn't then, but because of C.L.R. and Selma, and them talking about what the Black community was in Britain, the relationship between Asians and West Indians, the new African population, which was just coming, who we were, where we'd come from, what shaped us? And one of the first things that Darcus did was let Selma James do a study class for a *Race Today* Collective that he formed, and she talked about the five pillars that hold up capitalist society, the media, the army, the police…you know, she made us have an understanding of the state. We never did that in Black Power movements, we never analysed who we were in Britain, and what the structures were in Britain that we had to face. So, Selma did those study classes to begin with, and then Darcus, all the time. I mean, *Race Today*, there was at no stage where there was not some kind of political discussion going on in *Race Today*. All the time, about any movement, any struggle. We would analyse, you know, if you were invited to be involved in the Police Campaign, that was discussed and analysed, it wasn't, yeah, yeah, yeah, let's go and support, not at all. And that's really what he brought, I think, which, I think this current article in *The Guardian** talks about was a kind of intellectual depth that we don't have anymore, which has gone. Which I blame on EDI and woke culture, but that's another story.

RW: Could you tell us what you did as assistant editor, what your role involved?

LH-H: Yeah. So as assistant editor, I'd be part of the editorial board meeting, so Darcus had an editorial board, separate to the collective discussions. So that would be to discuss the content of the journal. Darcus **[00:50:00]** realised that my literacy skills were limited, so he persuaded an author called Andrew Salkey, who was a Caribbean writer, to train myself and Lorine into some kind of journalistic practice. So, we would go to Andrew Salkey's house in West London, and Andrew would make us write. He would make us write about our own experiences, primarily, first of all, and he would then edit it and tell us where our writing could be improved and develop sentence structure.

So, I was trained again, now when I look back, trained in journalism by Andrew Salkey, who was a BBC journalist at that time. So we would go to Andrew's house, and he would make us write, he would edit us, he would talk to us about writing. So Darcus realised that to be an assistant editor, you do need some basic editing skills Leila, yes, alright. So, he sent me to

Andrew, myself and a young woman called Lorine who died of cancer, unfortunately. So Andrew taught us writing and journalism.

So after I'd got that, then I was more able. And then again, watching how Darcus would edit articles, so I would see an article that came in, and I would see how he had edited it. What he would say was, again, because of his classical background, English, all of that he had, and I would see what he would, just physically see how he would edit journals, articles rather, what he would take out, what he would keep in, what he would send back and say, you need to develop this a bit more. So I kind of learned under him, those skills as well.

And then of course, he encouraged me to have my own column, which I did, called "Without Malice". So I began to write for the journal too. And he said I had a kind of skill, I said, but I don't have that skill, you have Leila, which was kind of a micky taking skill, I would take different things and take the piss out of them, basically. So I did that. And just basically learned that way. And then he would say, well why don't you edit this piece, and then I would edit it and see.

But at that time in *Race Today*, we had a lot of support, we had a lot of support from some white comrades as well, who would come in and support us, help us with editing, journalism, you know? It was like a real hotbed of discussion and understanding. So in that environment you kind of thrive and learn quickly, rather than if you're learning it as a skill to learn. I mean with Andrew I learned really rapidly, he said, you're getting there Leila, you understand the structure of an article now, you understand what you do, and I did that quickly because of the environment I was in, most definitely.

RW: I realise we're going to be jumping forward a little bit here, but I talked, introducing this interview about your role with the Black People's Day of Action. Could you tell us how you became involved with that?

LH-H: Right, so Black People's Day of Action is the New Cross Fire where 13 young people are murdered. At that time there was no doubt within the Black community's mind, that it was a racist attack. The media ignored it, the government ignored it, the police then tried to frame Black people for it. And so the rage, the culmination of all the stuff we'd been doing in the decade previously, I think came to a head with the New Cross Fire. And I think for many people that was the watershed moment of, this has got to stop. They don't want us here, society's ignoring us, we have children who died, 13, 14 and 15, and nobody's saying anything, it doesn't matter. We thought I don't think so.

So, the meetings that we were holding in South London, which we then called the People's Assembly, were really very fiery meetings, people were angry, people wanted action. And at one of the meetings, somebody just got up and said we should have a Black strike. The Black strike then moved into a day of action, that would be on a weekday when we would disrupt London. That we would march through London, on a weekday, and then

people would have to take notice of our cause. That's in a potted way, how that came about. But the politics behind that were again, *Race Today*, Darcus and John La Rose, we were meeting all the time, planning a political strategy of how and where and what, and what this meant, and the shape it should take. And how, because at that time, the whole of the state, in terms of the mediators, the liberals, the church, the social workers, were persuading many people in the Black community that direct action was not the way to go, we had to combat a lot of that as well.

I mean, the church played a really active role, with the parents, in trying to say, do not go with these troublemakers. Darcus Howe and John La Rose, are going to end you up in trouble. This atmosphere that's going on, you disassociate yourself from it. And it was John La Rose's political skill, Wilfred Wood, partly Darcus, going into parents' homes. I went into parents' homes, I'm still friendly with Mrs Gooding one of the mothers of the murdered children and we talked to them about why we had to take really serious action, why we couldn't leave it to MPs, to the church, to social workers, to sort this one out. And so we were able, at that time, to get the parents on our side, which was really important. At the same time mobilising the community to pay for the funerals and all of that.

So, it was a huge national Black community operation, because from Newcastle down, people were coming to these meetings in London, to discuss, what are we going to do about this?

Some of it was quite militant and violent, about picking up the gun and shooting fascists and all of this, but we held the line of, we had to do an action that was going to be meaningful. So I was part of those meetings, I was part of the contingent that went to meet with the police in Brixton Police Station, where they would tell us there's no way you're marching through London on a Monday, it's not happening. We would say, yes it is. No it's not. Yes it is. This was lots and lots of negotiation. But they had their agents in the meetings, didn't they? They had Special Branch, and they were told that the atmosphere was so high, that if you don't allow these people to do what they want to do, we're going to have trouble on our streets, which of course, then later happens in Brixton and all the uprisings. So in order for that, finally they say we can march through London, and the story of what happened is well documented.

But I was one of the people who was doing the national mobilisation, so I was talking to Gus [John] in Manchester, I was talking to people in Huddersfield. Darcus was travelling up and down the country, he said he would do a national mobilisation. So we'd be in touch with him and say, where are you speaking? I'm speaking in Bristol. Who are the contacts? So I was kind of coordinating the whole thing, getting the names of all the different points, nationally, who said they were coming down to the march, how many coaches they would bring, who the people to contact were. So, I was doing that, so kind of doing the national coordination, at the same time as building the placards, the coffins, who was going to do what.

So, *Race Today* which was the headquarters for the Massacre Action Committee, we were kind of the headquarters for the planning and organising of the March. And because I was in *Race Today,* I was key in doing that.

RW: So how did you know who to contact if you're moving outwards from London then?

LH-H: Because Darcus was travelling around the country. So if he was in Huddersfield, he would then say, the people in Huddersfield will be, say, Violet and Mary, this is their address, this is their number. So it's all done on the telephone. Gus is in Manchester, Gus is saying these are the people in Manchester, this is the community group I've worked with in Nottingham, these are the people who can organise the coaches? They would send me the information for me to coordinate, so I would know what was going on nationally.

RW: Logistically it's a huge operation, because there's coaches from all across the…

LH-H: Coming from everywhere, from all across the country. And hoping, even though they say they're coming, hoping on the day that they're actually coming. But getting the sense, I mean, *Race Today*, as the headquarters, our phone never stopped ringing with requests for speakers. I mean, all the colleges, universities, saying, we want to be part of this mobilisation, could you come and speak to this community group, could you come to this college, could you come to this university? So, at the same time as doing that, I'm going out speaking to people, saying why we have to have a Black People's Day of Action, why it's important people attend.

And so doing that kind of mobilising as well and producing leaflets and pamphlets and, you know, and at the same time, always making sure, because that was our politics, that it wasn't a campaign that separated from the heart of the matter, which was the parents and the children, that they had to be central, that's why they were at the front of the march, it was them. We didn't want to take it as a political thing and then just run with it, we had to keep that community centred around, these are the children that were killed in this fire, these are their parents, these are their brothers and sisters, what they want is also going to determine what we do.

RW: To what extent was there a precedent for that scale, or just for that kind of organisation?

LH-H: No, never, no. So, in the seventies, and again, I'm going to say '71, in Alexandra Palace we had the, when all the Black organisations in Britain came to Ally Pally, in the, I forget what it's called, but National Black People's Convention, I think. So then, all the different Black Power groups, from all over England came to Alexandra Palace. I remember Altheia LeCointe was a speaker, Darcus was a speaker, there would have been a speaker from BUFP, from BLF, all the different organisations. So

that was the first time there'd been some kind of national coordination, but that was of Black organisations. In terms of mobilising the community, this is why the Black People's Day of Action is so momentous, nationally to mobilise the community, that's slightly different, it wasn't the organisations, although many of the organisations would have moved into community groups and been part of it, we were doing more community organisations, churches, different people who were asking us. It was much more wider than that. So it was the first time, I think, that kind of organisation had taken place in Britain.

RW: I think I'm going to move at this point, to our other interest for this interview. And we're going to be going back in time a bit now.

LH-H: Yeah, sure.

RW: But to talk about your encounters with James Baldwin and your relationship with James Baldwin. And just to start things off, you did mention this [**01:00:00]** a little bit earlier, but how did you first, do you remember when you first encountered James Baldwin as a figure or…?

LH-H: A television interview.

RW: Okay.

LH-H: I'm not going to say that is was the Cambridge Debate, I'm not going to say what it is, but I saw James Baldwin on television, most definitely. And as I've said, our lives then were centred around the box, that's what we had. So, I've seen an interview with Baldwin, and probably reading *The Telegraph*, I would think I might have seen an interview or read a book review or something. But I became aware of Baldwin as a writer then, and then, because of my mental and emotional state, I'd go and buy all his books. So, the first book I read is *Another Country*. I read *Another Country*, I then read *Giovanni's Room*, and I just know that for me, I always say Baldwin saved my life, because that is when I realised that many of the, all these threads that are going on, he kind of makes them coherent, and he makes them understandable.

But his writing isn't just a pure political writing, his writing is very personal as well. And that really resonates with me, of the personal conflict that people are having because of the different relationships with people who are white, people who don't understand you, people who part understand you. I remember *Another County* really, really moved me. I think I wrote to him after *Another Country*, I'm not sure. But I remember just that way he wrote, I just thought, it was like a sigh of relief. Oh my God, here is someone who absolutely gets it, understands what we're involved in, but is not backing down from race at all, and has got this real voice about what is going on in America to Black people.

So that, to me, is what I think moved me, to read Baldwin. And then, of course, I just poured my heart to him, I loved him

RW: Do you remember, so you wrote a letter?

LH-H: A letter, which I sent to his publisher's.

RW: Michael Joseph?

LH-H: Yes, and poured my heart out to him, saying what his books had meant to me. I think even then I was saying that this isn't something that can be done without an understanding of white society, of white people, that we understand why they think the way they do. I mean, I'm sure a lot of it was gibberish, but it was just a pouring out of a lot of emotion, and saying, how his books had helped me, and helped me to understand who I was and where I was, and just thanked him.

RW: Do you remember how old you would have been when you wrote?

LH-H: I was 18, yeah, 18, 19, yeah. I remember. I can see my East London home in Avenons Road, Plaistow, and when the door knocked and it was a telegram as well, yeah.

RW: Did you ever expect him to write?

LH-H: No, not at all, no. But I knew then though, there's a funny thing though, at that time authors did write back to people who wrote to them. There was a kind of culture where if you wrote to a writer or something, sometimes you did get an acknowledgement back. So I don't think I was doing it in the wind, I think I grew up understanding that sometimes if you wrote to people, you got a reply. But I don't think I expected a reply, but I just had to let him know what his books had meant to me, what that understanding of race in this society and racism in this society had meant to me, and had helped me, and really gave me confidence, I think.

RW: Could you describe receiving that, so you got a reply by…?

LH-H: Telegram. So there's a knock at the door, and the postman then would deliver, the telegraph system was quite different, I think, to what it is now. It was on a brown piece of paper with ticker tape. You get ticker tape on it. And it's in a brown envelope. So the person came, handed me this brown envelope, I immediately thought it was news from Africa, or from my relatives who I'd left in Africa, so took it. And then just opened it, and I think I opened it in the hallway, 'cause I was a bit anxious, and then went into, what would be our sitting room, and just saw the words, "keep the faith", Jimmy.

RW: Do you remember how you felt?

LH-H: Well, I think amazed. I think amazed, and then just like, James Baldwin's written back to me. But then the status Baldwin has in years that come after, he didn't have that kind of status then, he was very much the kind of

radical person who was telling white society about itself. So it was a different era. But I just thought, you know, he's understood me. And understood me to the extent that he's bothered to reply. So that was quite emotional for me, as well, yeah. Very emotional. And again, he gave me strength. He let me know that all the lip I was giving my mum and stepfather was quite right, yeah. It was that kind of confidence, yeah.

RW: And Baldwin visited Britain quite a few times in that period?

LH-H: He did, in that period, yes.

RW: Were you ever present at any of the times that he visited?

LH-H: I think I might have seen him once, but I'm trying to think when. And I'm thinking it might be in my Black Power era. But no, he came, but I was always aware of him, I was aware of any time he did a television programme, or anything like that, acutely aware of Baldwin and what he stood for, very much so, very, very much so.

RW: He spoke at the Soledad Brothers rally at Westminster, would that have been the…or maybe that was, that would be '71?

LH-H: Yes, no, no, that's true, no that's true, 'cause I led the Soledad march, didn't I?

RW: Mmm.

LH-H: I was one of the people who indicted America for racism. I mean, I can't believe, the things we did. I walk into the Embassy with a petition and say, I'm indicting you for racism, and you were just doing this stuff. And when I look back I just find it hilarious in a way. But no, so then, yes, that must be it.

RW: Central Hall?

LH-H: Central Hall, yes.

Yeah, Central Hall would have been then, yes. 'Cause that was a huge moment in our lives as well, George Jackson and Angela [Davis] and all of that. Yes.

RW: And your relationship with Baldwin's work continued after?

LH-H: Oh yes, I read everything, *The Fire Next Time*, just read always. And although, I'm trying to think in our Black Power reading list, if there was a Baldwin book, there probably was one. But I think, because of how he wrote, he was kind of literary as well, if you know what I mean, it was literature, as much as it was polemical. So, I think *The Fire Next Time*, is the one that we kind of latched onto in Black Power. We all knew of James

Baldwin in the Black Power movement, all of us did. Yeah, he was one of our esteemed figures. Yeah.

RW: The other thing that I was wanting to ask you about, was this tribute that you arranged for Baldwin.

LH-H: Yes, sure.

RW: It would have been 1988.

LH-H: When he died, whenever he died, yeah. So when we got the news that Baldwin had died, because he'd had such an impact on me, I remember saying to Darcus, we need to organise a tribute. And I'm trying to think back, so we knew that Maya had been very close to Baldwin…

RW: Maya Angelou?

LH-H: Angelou, yeah. And because Florence Alexis had been a friend of *Race Today* and a very close friend of Baldwin, Florence was very, very close with Baldwin in his life in Paris, she knew him very, very well, through Florence, so I remember speaking to Florence, and saying, we need to do something Florence. And the other person who'd been very influenced by Baldwin was Caz [Caryl] Phillips, who was coming to prominence with writing. So, I remember speaking to Caz, saying, you know, we need to organise this tribute for Baldwin, speaking to Florence saying, we want to do it. And then I remember *Race Today*, we said Creation for Liberation, we should organise this tribute to Baldwin and everybody agreed we should. And so through our contacts, somebody gave me Maya Angelou's telephone number, so I rang Maya, I remember I called Maya, and I said, Maya, would you come over to do this tribute for James Baldwin, and if you did what would be the terms, we don't have a lot of money? And she said, passage, hotel, and I'll do it.

So once we'd got Maya Angelou, we knew then we…you know? And then Florence was in touch with David, Caz also said then, we should have, if we have Maya, we have David, and then of course it came about that [The} *Amen Corner*, and Caz and the whole relationship with Anton Phillips. Then we ought to show *The Amen Corner* again, I'd forgotten that whole impact that [*The*] *Amen Corner* had on us, because now we're coming into our own in terms of drama and literature, that whole side of that movement gets off, and I've done it myself, of how much we were doing culturally, our poetry evenings, our drama, all the things we were doing. So then [The] *Amen Corner*, had to be, then it kind of just took shape from there. And then, obviously hold it in Brixton, Brixton Town Hall now Lambeth Town Hall, we'll have it there, and got the deal with Maya arranged, the date, and off we went, publicising it.

And on the night, it was, the people were just queuing up for, we were completely sold out, some ridiculous price we had. But then people were just, we had to lock the doors, because people were clamouring to get in. I

think for several reasons, one Baldwin, one Maya speaking about Baldwin, that would be something you wouldn't miss, but no, it was a huge event, huge event that we did. And Maya was just brilliant, I mean, she was just a raconteur. She just told the stories, she just told stories of James, of herself, of her life, it was a magical evening, absolutely magical.

RW: And who else did you have speaking?

LH-H: **[01:10:00]** So, it was David Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Caz Phillips, Linton [Kwesi Johnson], Darcus, who I think read from Baldwin, and Florence. Yeah.

RW: You mentioned *The Amen Corner*, and can we go back to that actually, 'cause you're right, we didn't touch on that, but, so it was being produced in…?

LH-H: The West End.

RW: The West End?

LH-H: Yes.

RW: That would have been in the 1980s?

LH-H: Yeah, with Anton Phillips, didn't he, he did, yeah? I think it was put on in a more local *The Tricycle Theatre* or something, and then it moved to the West End.

RW: And did you go to see…?

LH-H: I went to see that, yes. But because part of our work in *Race Today*, a lot of it was around culture and discussion about Black culture, and what it meant and where was it going, and what was its relevance, and all the cultural things in art, we did art exhibitions, poetry readings, book reviews, theatre reviews, that was a really big movement, that was side by side with the political movement.

So because of how we were placed and because of what *Race Today* had done, getting the people to come over, I mean Maya knew about *Race Today*, she knew who we were. She knew we were radicals in London. People were aware, people in the States were aware of what *Race Today* was doing, and Darcus in particular. We were known, it was known. So when we said, we're going to do this in London, Maya just said, fare and hotel and I'll come, and that was it. So once we'd got Maya Angelou, we just thought, yes, we've got Maya, so we can now really build this up.

But again, I had no idea of the impact it would have in terms of the hundreds of people who would want to come. 'Cause Brixton at that time, was it about 400 people? And we thought, yeah, we can fill that. But, I mean, we could have filled it up twice over easily.

RW: Have you got any other memories of the event?

LH-H: Well Maya telling me off, I remember Maya telling me off. I remember people coming to me, Leila, Leila, we've got to lock the doors, it's full to capacity now, we can't let any more in. Okay, lock the doors. And then Leila, Leila, we've locked Maya out. I remember that. And her coming in raging, and looking at me, and saying, what do you think you're doing? I remember Maya telling me off, very much so. Why are you flapping, what's wrong with you? Get yourself together, you're a Black woman, what…I said, Maya, it's just all gone pear-shaped, everything. Just get yourself together. I remember that to this day. But then she just put on a show which was magnificent, yeah. And the atmosphere in the room. And for me it was like, full circle of honouring someone who had such an impact on me, and really kind of shaped a lot of my thinking, I would say. Not as much, say, later on with Darcus and Siva but who had really given me the kind of emotional leverage to know that what I was feeling was right, and you have to fight for our rights, it was him. So for me, it was an acknowledgement for me. And when I said to Darcus, we need to do a tribute for Baldwin, he said, okay, go ahead, organise it, no problem.

RW: Was it a surprise how popular it was, how many people came?

LH-H: Well I think that by then, we're in the eighties aren't we, I think Baldwin's literature, people had known much more about it. In some schools, I won't say a lot of schools, but it is kind of being read a bit more, and who he is, is being known a bit more. So, I think if we'd really thought about it, we would have gone for a bigger venue, but we wanted it in a Black community. We did a lot of things in the town hall at that time. So, no, we knew, I mean, I knew how Baldwin was felt about within the Black community, most definitely. I mean, and his writing, and the fact that, what a great writer he was. And even when he spoke that passion of what he had, that was undeniable, that belief. As I always say, once you had that system of belief, then that carried you through. And that's what he encouraged in all of us, to know that what we were doing was right, and that what was being done to us was wrong no matter what everybody else was saying to you.

RW: It seems quite a good note to finish on, but is there anything else you wanted to talk about before we…?

LH-H: No, not at all. No, I think that's it. Yeah, I mean, I'm sorry we didn't talk a lot about Creation for Liberation but that's okay.

RW: That's the one thing that I wrote down actually, would you like to say what Creation for Liberation was?

LH-H: Yeah, so sure. So, Creation for Liberation was the artistic arm of *Race Today*, founded by Linton originally. And the idea was that we would give a voice to the Black and Asian cultural movements that were going on in the country, which, at that time were not being recognised by anybody, but

were going on in our community. At, where the Panthers would have their events, they were putting on dramas, they were putting on plays, we would have scripts from abroad. But we were doing it within our own communities.

So Creation for Liberation was to give a voice to that, but also Darcus felt that we ought to have some kind of critical eye on what we were doing, so he wouldn't say that everything we were doing in the Black community was right, or that the expression artistically was right, so there ought to be some kind of critical lens as well. So we did a lot of analysis and review and debates. There was a big debate between Linton and someone called "Dread Fred", who is in fact Farrukh Dhondy about Bob Marley, about Marley and things. So we wanted a critical eye as well, we wanted literary criticism. Akua Rugg was a member of the collective, she did a reviews of the theatre movements, and what it was we portraying, and how much a vehicle they were for actually developing what was going on in the Black community. So that's what Creation for Liberation was about.

We had the first Black art exhibitions; Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce, Denzel Forrester, all of the artists you see today, all of them were part of Creation for Liberation's art exhibitions. Aubrey Williams gave a big lecture on the Black aesthetic, asking these artists to examine what it was they were doing, and if there was such a thing as a Black aesthetic. So it was kind of intellectual as well as a cultural movement around arts, that we did.

RW: So where would you host those exhibitions?

LH-H: All over. So the first exhibition was held at a church called St Matthew's, and we put all corrugated iron around the church, we were allowed to at those times, to represent what had gone on in the Brixton Riots, and the corrugated iron, that was representative…

So we put one on in a big church, St Matthew in Brixton. We put the second one on in another venue in Brixton, I want to say the town hall. So we would hold these art exhibitions, mainly in Brixton, and then have seminars side by side, discussion forums about, and Black artists thinking about their development, and what support or what not support they weren't getting from mainstream. Because at that time, I think, you have to understand, anything that we were doing as Black people was on the margins of society. We were completely marginalised. Anything we did, we had to do for ourselves.

We had to get the debates going ourselves, we had to think for ourselves about where we were because mainstream society just wasn't interested. I mean, they were not interested in Black voices, that is the reality. Either Black voices in politics, or Black voices in culture. And so *Race Today* very much saw itself as a vehicle for those voices, and to take us from in off the margins, catapulting us to say to Britain, we're here and we're part of you, and you need to take notice of what we've said. So the Black People's Day of Action does that in a political way, and then the artistic movements are doing that in an artistic and cultural way.

RW: Was there a connection to the Caribbean Artists Movement, or was that like a…?

LH-H: Yes, 'cause John La Rose, very much, we knew about the Caribbean Artist Movement. John was a key figure in Creation for Liberation and the discussions and debates that we should have. I mean, our history, if you look at it, it's C.L.R. John La Rose, Darcus, that's kind of where we've travelled from.

RW: And Andrew Salkey. Yeah.

LH-H: And Andrew Salkey of course, yeah. That's the kind of way we've travelled. One of my deep regrets now, and that article has made me think, the one that was in the *Guardian*, on Saturday, was it? Is how much we valued what had gone before us, to give us an understanding. Whereas today it's like it's, not at all, do you know what I mean? I mean, I'm part of a group that organises events for Black History Month, and they'll actually say things to you like, the past is the past. And you think, well no, the past is what's actually shaped us now. But they can't see it, do you know what I mean? It's that. But for us we definitely had that long line of understanding of where we were from. And Richard [Small] was a friend, so he understood the Abeng movement, and the Rastas and all of the things that were feeding in to what was going on culturally in this society. And we wanted to know, we felt like it was our duty to know.

RW: And of course, those movements, were also calling back, like New Beacon [Books] to *The Beacon*, and even just what they were publishing.

LH-H: And George Padmore, why was George Padmore important, you know…

RW: Yeah, exactly.

LH-H: …with C.L.R. and all of that. So Darcus used to say, what we didn't realise is we were living in a kind of renaissance period in Black history in Britain. We didn't know it at the time, but we were, when we were certainly trying to renew and understand who we were as people. But that was internationally as well. And then of course, once you've got [Toni] Morrison and [Ntozake] Shange, and Alice Walker, and other people now coming up and being acknowledged, all of that's, I mean, the impact of Toni Morrison on Black women, I can tell you, that was huge. I mean, when we read *The Bluest Eye*, we all just thought, wow, you know, **[01:20:00]** this is something new, you know, this kind of… And Shange's poetry, every three minutes a women is raped, every three…we just thought, wow, you know, these are the voices now.

So, we lived through that without realising just what, I always tell everybody, I'm really so glad I lived through that period. I realise now, I lived through a period of complete change and understanding of society, which I'm sorry to say today, we just don't have anymore. I mean, I'm sure it will come

again, Darcus always use to say, Leila, it will come again, don't worry. Don't…the thing about Trump and that, it will come again. And that article in the *Guardian*, I thought, my God, there are some people who are thinking about these things, about what's happened, about Black intellectual life, and why can't we discuss race in a vigorous way anymore? Why is it that someone has to get kicked out of the Labour Party for just even raising it?

So yeah, so I'm always an optimist, mainly 'cause Darcus was always an optimist, but I do realise I lived through a period of huge creativity, which informs me today, I think. Which is why I'm not downhearted, 'cause you could easily be downhearted. I meet a lot of depressed people, I can tell you.

RW: Yeah. I mean, so many of those institutions that you've described that were forged through a lot of hard work and a lot of people working together, so many of them came to an end by the late eighties, really didn't they?

LH-H: Yeah, definitely, yeah.

And for Darcus, he just said *Race Today* has exhausted its time. He was quite clear. We were talking about an immigrant reality, and that shift from immigrant into being British, and that was our experience. We were talking about us, that's who we were. He said, it's a different ballgame now, and he looked at his children, and he said, we're not talking to these people. He told us all, we've exhausted our historical moment, and only now do you really understand what he meant. We're not the ones, now, to say what should be done for the future. There's a generation that's going to determine that for itself, and they're not speaking our language. We don't speak their language, which is so true. Yeah.

RW: Okay. Thank you very much Leila.

LH-H: No, that's okay.

RW: Thank you, I'm going to press stop.

End of transcript

*on p.19 Leila Hassan Howe refers to the following article:
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/18/diane-abbott-britain race-conversations-minorities