

## Painting Power: Art as a Political Tool for Black Britons

“I just don’t like politics.” It’s a line heard at workplaces, around dinner tables, among friends and family alike. People are quick to declare that they aren’t interested in politics, that they don’t care to discuss it, that it’s just not something they think impacts them enough to be important. However, this is very rarely a factual statement. In today’s climate especially, everything is political. There is always a deeper meaning, always an agenda and motivations that come from the everchanging and volatile world of politics. Art, as an example, is deeply political and has actively and foundationally impacted the political and societal struggle of Black Britons. It became a mock political system that filled in the gaps where existing institutions failed and has functioned as a tool in many ways for the Black population as they attempt to heal from England’s colonial history culturally and politically. For true progress towards decolonization, it must not be forgotten that *everything* is political. To consider art without considering its greater political and cultural context is to do the work and its artist a disservice.

While there are parallels between the Black experience in London and the experience of the Black population in the United States, there are also many differences due to unique historical contexts. Much of the Black population comes from the Windrush generation, which refers to the wave of immigration from colonies in the Caribbean and West Africa to Britain beginning in 1948. The people coming over on these ships were responding to a call for workers, necessary to aid the floundering post-war economy in Britain. However, their arrival was not as socially accepted as it was economically, with pressures placed upon the people coming to the motherland to denounce their cultural identities, microaggressions and racism imbedded in the colonial society. There was resistance against discrimination in hiring, against stereotypes and racist groups like the National Front, including a Black Panther Party inspired by the parallel

movement in the U.S. This resistance continued throughout the 1960s and led to the creation of the Race Relations Act in 1965, which did outlaw discrimination but did not put a stop to racial acts that fall outside of the explicit exclusions listed in the act. It also did not fully prevent the most egregious of racist acts, which continue to this day. These include the New Cross Fire and Operation Swamp in 1981, the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, and more all the way to the death of Sarah Reed in 2016 and the increased deportation campaigns in 2018 and beyond (Narwal). This paper will outline how the art world has offered alternative routes of political action and methods of healing for Black Britons since the 1950s continuing until the present day.

The way racism operates in the UK is sometimes overt, a direct choice or action motivated purely by racist ideas and beliefs but can also be much more subtle. It is imbedded into the way people interact, into the way systems are built, is found by reading between the lines and seeking the deeper motivations behind a seemingly innocuous choice. This kind of racism is arguably harder to cleanse and cannot always be addressed by a clear-cut surface-level policy. Instead, there needs to be an effort to dig deep and pull the problem from the root. The art world offers an outlet for Black Britons to heal, to construct a space for themselves, and to combat the narratives woven into the societal fabric of London. The Black Art Group was a movement built by artists like Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and Donald Rodney, who used their work to speak on ideas of race relations and belonging and to protest injustices such as the killings of young Black men (Araeen 138). They created exhibits that dealt exclusively with these themes, carving out space for themselves in a society that did not offer it otherwise. The Black Art movement is described to explore the differences between Black and white Britons by focusing not on the socially constructed differences themselves, but “how this difference is defined and experienced in a society that has not yet fully come to terms with its colonial past and its racial violence”

(Araeen 135). Keith Piper mused in a 2002 essay that, indeed, this movement of the 1980s cannot be truthfully examined without equal consideration of the political goings on, the reggae music explosion, the youth organizing, and all other societal context for the decade (Piper 40).

As Piper mentioned, Reggae music is one of, if not the most, influential forms of art used by Black Britons to respond to failures in the political system and has long been a form of protest. While always privately enjoyed, the expansion of sound systems and creation of reggae music in the public sphere took off in the 1970s, the children of the Windrush generation using the music to push back against discrimination in the country they were born in (Yates). When institutions failed to amplify Black voices and did not fight to right injustices, reggae music did. The New Cross Fire killed 13 Black children at a birthday party in 1981, and despite survivors and witnesses believing there was racially motivated arson involved, the cause of the fire was never discovered. Famous reggae songs like “New Cross Fire” and “New Cross Massakah” and even the album *New Cross Fire* by Sir Collins, whose son died in the fire, provided a space for public mourning that was not provided by the government (Yates). The fire and the introduction of policing policies calling sussing, similar to America’s stop-and-frisk that allowed police to stop Black people for no real reason, led to the Brixton riots in April of 1981. While the narrative spun by the state was of a violent senseless mob, the song “Di Great Inshreckshan” by Linton Kwesi Johnson set the record straight with his depiction of the protest and the injustices the crowd was fighting against. He states they aimed to make the state understand “dat we NAH take no more of dem oppression” and talks about consulting “deh ghetto grapevine to find out all dat I can find”, demonstrating the importance of communication among the community during times of chaos and political turmoil (Kwesi Johnson). As author Ngugi Wa Thiong’o states, “if one cannot see clearly, if our memory of what has been and could be has been completely distorted,

then we cannot see clearly what we have to do in order to free ourselves in all the other aspects” (95). Art is essential to storytelling, to passing down knowledge, which builds power. History is all too often told by the colonizers, allowing them to spin a narrative however they see fit, no matter how truthful it is. This is why archiving is so important and has provided Black Britons with the ability to build both community and a collective memory, something that the state and other Britons attempted to deny them. History and record-keeping are political, and those who take ownership of their own archive build power through memory. Through the creation of art, from the visual art of Eddie Chambers and Donald Rodney to the short film *You Hide Me* by Nii Kwate Owoo about stolen artifacts in the British museum basement, stories hushed by oppressive forces are documented and preserved to confront the past and bring power to the silenced.

In amplifying these voices, modern day activists face an extremely difficult job, as the media landscape has become so oversaturated that it can be very hard to break through. There is also, as previously noted, a tendency of people to disengage from politics, to fail to use critical thinking or to seek out information for themselves. Art can make stories and knowledge accessible to all audiences. Artists like Zita Holbourne use their work to call attention to social justice issues, spread knowledge and build a coalition. She stated she sees art as a way to celebrate progress that has been made to keep momentum for a movement strong, as well as to document injustices and tragedies (Holbourne). Her art and other artists whose work centers around activism is part of what kept the story of Stephen Lawrence, who was killed in a racist attack at the age of 18 in 1993, visible enough to force pressure on the law enforcement system that had originally failed him, finally resulting in two convictions for the crime in 2012 (Crown Prosecution Service). Zita is currently pushing for justice for Sarah Reed, who is a victim of worsening mental health conditions due to racist realities, and who committed suicide in prison

after being denied her meds and kept in horrific conditions (Holbourne). These names and stories could easily fade away, which is what the government would likely prefer, but their images and truths are kept alive along with the fight for justice, forged on after the systems meant to protect Britons fail to do so.

One piece of art that encapsulates all the previously mentioned ways art is important to the Black British community and political movement and dives deeper into its ability to heal is the novel *Open Water* by Caleb Azumah Nelson. The novel follows two unnamed young Black adults in London as they grapple with defining themselves, their places in the world, and their relationship. The male main character specifically struggles to reckon with his identity, facing that his very existence is made exhausting due to constant racism, with his recurring deep fear of police stemming from a history of violence towards Black youth. Throughout the novel, he finds solace and healing in music, in his photography project where he is documenting other Black artists in London, in observing works of art that allow him to feel and to take up space in the world. He is only able to stand up to what pains him and is robbing him of his joy when he is immersing himself in art and allowing it to bring him power. The vagueness around the characters names and backgrounds allows them to represent any and all people who know his experience, the novel itself doing the same work of saying I see you, I hear you, I value you that the art described in the story does for the main character. Azumah Nelson's tribute to Black art shows that it can be an escape, a form of healing that cuts right to the pain of colonization. This is just as vitally important in the fight for structural change, as one cannot look after others and fight for freedom without first looking after themselves. The main character ponders while dancing to drum music surrounded by his neighbors, "We find ourselves mislabelled. We who are loud and angry, we who are bold and brash. We who are Black... You worked twice as hard

today, but that isn't important, not here, not now. All that matters is that you are here, that you are present, can't you hear? What does it sound like? Freedom?" (Azumah Nelson 39).

Colonization is not a simple act. It invades the economy, culture, political system ecosystem, and psychology of a place and a people. Due to this scope and scale, decolonization must be similarly worked towards in all these spheres (Wa Thiong'o 95). Art, specifically works stemming from the Black Art Movement, can offers ways to confront ugly truths, to give a voice to the voiceless, to build power and to provide solace to people who have been wronged. Black Britons have struggled to find spaces that are welcoming to them, have faced constant attacks on their identity and their right to be in a country they've known their whole lives. However, they have found ways to continue the fight and have worked to build their own spaces using the universal language of art. Political contexts are woven into these works and have an impact that goes far beyond visual appeal. All this to say, it really and truly is always that deep.

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