

The Emergence of Black Art in Britain

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This paper will map the emergence of black art in Britain through two exhibitions curated by Pakistan-born artist/writer/curator and activist Rasheed Araeen: *Creation for Liberation* (1984), a small open show at the Brixton Art Gallery, London; and *The Other Story* (1989), a groundbreaking exhibition of black British art at the Hayward Gallery. While the Brixton exhibition was part of the minority push to highlight local and community perspectives, the purpose of the latter exhibition was to install black British art, hitherto neglected by the ethnocentric art establishment, as a part of the story of British modernism. Thus the exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London sought to address the lack of “visibility” concerning black art.¹

The trajectory for those involved in what became known as the “Black Art Movement” followed a course not dissimilar to other marginalised and excluded groups seeking recognition in a hostile environment. According to Cornel West, this struggle included four options:

- (a) the pursuit of rewards and approval from legitimising institutions of white culture which is assimilatory and labelled the “Booker T Temptation,” (Booker T and the M.G.s were a racially mixed 1960s soul band who achieved mainstream acceptance backing Otis Redding and others);
- (b) the “Talented Tenth Seduction,” representing the move to group insularity, which includes an arrogant turning inwards from racism

which is self-defeating;

(c) the “Go-It Alone” strategy, which involves a turning away from the first two options; and

(d) the “Critical Organic Catalyst,” the model that embraces the politics of difference.²

In the 1980s, the assimilatory road (a) was not always available for black artists since the art institutions were unwelcoming. A collective approach, such as (b), had already been achieved to some degree at a regional and community level in Britain. Exhibitions of black art had already taken place: for example, *The Thin Black Line* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London (1985) and *Black Art an' done* at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery (1981). This kind of group collective approach can be a strategic staging post at an early stage of group consciousness. However, it can prove inward looking and has limitations in terms of audience, and for this reason, it was not necessarily a long-term strategy. The notion of proceeding individually (c) had proved successful for some artists. However, though appealing, the inclusion of the work of “others” was often simply used as evidence by curators that cultural difference was valued. Therefore, the latter option (d) has often been considered the best option, as the artist “stays attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer,”³ although it can also be particularly challenging given the risk of incorporation of the other’s cultural production into the dominant discourse.

This paper begins with a brief overview of post-war migration to explain the presence of Britain’s black population, and the phenomenon of second-generation immigrants, before going on to discuss the emergence of black art. I then discuss two exhibitions from the 1980s that signalled the emergence of what became known as the Black Art Movement. Interwoven will be a personal narrative documenting my involvement with the Movement. I will illustrate black art’s intersections with political, social and cultural terrains in order to demonstrate how it sought ways to construct new multi-layered identities across racial boundaries.

I will argue that, though the narrative of black art’s counter-hegemonic strategy might appear to be a coming-of-age story, culminating in its acceptance into the British canon, this was not the case. This was due its strategic essentialism and protest, together with its generally antagonistic relationship to British Art. Black art was thus drawn into debates concerning cultural difference and postmodernism and, consequently, its impact on modernism was de-politicised and contained.

Post-war migration: beginning to belong

While black people had been a feature of British life since the sixteenth century, the 1948 “Nationality Act” granted British passports to Commonwealth citizens,⁴ which meant right of entry and permanent residence to Britain for citizens from the Caribbean and newly-independent India and Pakistan. My Anglo-Indian parents, part of a large mixed-race group, were already out of place in India before Partition (their loyalty was to the British, they spoke English, dressed in western clothes, and lived apart from both the English and Indian communities), when they found themselves in newly independent Pakistan. Along with other Anglo-Indians who could prove they possessed a British paternal father or grandfather, they sought emigration to the fatherland. My parents arrived in London in the freezing winter of 1955 and like other black immigrants, they came to fill the jobs that British workers did not want in the factories and in the public transport systems of Britain’s largest cities. For most who arrived in Britain in the 1950s, the process of displacement was ambivalent. On the one hand it was “a violating force, an uprooting which rents and rips apart,”⁵ and on the other hand, it was a settling in, a sense of having arrived, of beginning to belong.⁶

Black citizens were desperately needed in Britain for their labour. They belonged to Britain in a legislative way, and also to varying degrees in an imagined sense, but they were, however, met with the realities of the “colour bar,” and everyday racism. Surveys suggest that black people were not considered a threat to Britain in the early 1950s, even though racial prejudice was widespread in the country after the war.⁷ One survey of social attitudes towards blacks in 1950 showed two thirds of respondents viewed blacks negatively, but more significantly half of this cohort was “extremely prejudiced.”⁸ Bowling suggests that these attitudes were omnipresent—in the workplace, in schools and in almost all institutions—to the extent that it was argued that racial violence was the result of competition for jobs and housing from the mid-1950s to 1962.⁹

From the mid-1950s onwards, immigrants became cast in terms of criminality and deviant forms of behaviour. They were also resented for receiving special treatment such as housing.¹⁰ An article in *The Times* from 1958 referred to immigrants in the following manner: “They are alleged to do no work and to collect a rich sum from the Assistance Board. They are said to find housing when white folk cannot. And they are charged with all kinds of misbehaviour, especially sexual.”¹¹ The intent of this quote was to cast immigrants as one collective group who pose a threat that is ominous. In addition, the reference to sexual deviancy unleashed deep-seated racist

anxieties on the part of white men about black men and their threat to white British women. In short, immigrants were a danger to their women and the social fabric.

Race relations turned nasty when Tory and far-right conservative politician, the Rt. Hon. Enoch Powell MP, delivered his so-called “Rivers of blood” speech which made reference to Virgil’s “the river Tiber foaming with much blood.” Also known as the Birmingham speech, it was delivered on the 20th April 1968 at the annual meeting of the West Midlands’ Conservative Political Centre. It proved an infamous and incendiary speech, employing a new rhetorical device that quoted his constituents directly. Though the authenticity of this anecdotal evidence was unproven, it reinforced the discourse of white Britain as normative. It thereby cast the immigrant as “other” and provocatively positioned white Britons as “strangers in their own country.”¹² It resulted in him being dismissed from the cabinet by Prime Minister Edward Heath, since the tone was considered racist. As a result, Powell became popular with sections of the white community who saw him as a spokesperson.

The Wilson-Callaghan Labour governments of 1974–79 were characterised by “popular disillusionment, in which society shifted to the right, preparing the ground for the Tory’s election victory in 1979.”¹³ For the left, the euphoria of 1968 had evaporated and there was, according to historian Sheila Rowbotham, a sense that “there was some peculiar notion of a pause.”¹⁴ The far right parties including the National Front, the British Movement and the British National Party all gained ground at council elections and there was marked increase in “Paki-bashing.”¹⁵ Clutterbuck observes that the 1970s “were agonising years for the British people, who felt frustrated, humiliated and insecure. By British standards they were exceptionally violent years.”¹⁶ I remember being wary of going out and using public transport, especially at night because of the threat of racist violence. It was enough of a problem to warrant avoiding certain parts of town.



Figure 1. *The Clash at Victoria Park. Photographer unknown.*

Organised resistance to racial violence came from social movements, such as *Rock Against Racism* (RAR), a grass-roots movement that emerged from the Socialist Worker Party (SWP) and the *Anti-Nazi League* (ANL). RAR was the first political movement to root itself in popular music and its generally young constituency came from a variety of religious and political affiliations. The soundtrack to the movement was DIY-punk that depended on elements of ska, rocksteady, reggae and dub and the bands included The Specials, Tom Robinson, Aswad, Madness, Elvis Costello and The Clash. The RAR rallies attracted the left, punks, anarchists, pro and anti-nazi skinheads and police. They were electrifying events, not least because of the threat of violence, where rumours of attacks by skinheads on anti-Nazi groups and on Asian communities were rife. Tensions were high. The events were a heady mix of edgy music, political protest, rumour of attack and anxiety. On April 23, 1979 the New Zealand-born teacher and anti-racism campaigner Blair Peach was knocked unconscious during the demonstration against the National Front in Southall, west London. He died the next day. No one was charged with his murder. Thirty years later, the police report has been published and states what has long been argued, that a police officer is likely to have “struck the fatal blow.”¹⁷

In 1981 in Brixton, south London, riots by black youth were thought to be the result of such oppressive policing and the implementation of the infamous stop and search “SUS laws,” which targeted black youth. The Scarman Report called the riots “the worst outbreak of disorder in the UK this century”; it blamed institutional racism and unemployment, together with the “racial disadvantage that [was] a fact of British life.”¹⁸ It was this social context that formed the backdrop to the emergence of black art.

Invisibility and black art

Invisibility, literally and metaphorically, is a product of the marginalisation that affects minorities. It occurs when the host community denies individual subjects and groups of people their substantive rights of belonging, thereby rendering them speechless. Black American writer, Ralph Ellison, describes the experience in *The Invisible Man* (1952): “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat.”¹⁹ In addition, its opposite mode, hyper-visibility was also invoked to deny belonging, in this case by linking black youth and crime in the public imagination. While this kind of discourse is often constructed by opportunistic politicians and reiterated by some sections of the media, it produces distorted representations, which in turn can produce negative effects on individuals and the community. This was the case for black artists in Britain.

Invisibility for black artists was a particular issue when it came to inclusion in the canon of British painting. For example, Jewish-American painter R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007) curated *The Human Clay* in 1976 (some thirteen years before his identification as a diasporic artist), which failed to include any black artists among the 46 contributors. Further, a survey at the Hayward Gallery a year later included only one black artist, Frank Bowling (born 1936), a contemporary of Hockney and Kitaj.²⁰ The experience of Bowling and others suggests that the phenomenon of black art and the work of black artists was ignored by the white art establishment because its work did not fit into the framework and the trajectory of British modernism. Indeed, Maharaj positions black art in open opposition to Western art and its privileged normative status and in so doing, he asserts a critique of Western power and thought from a position of marginality: "Black Art interrogates not only the classical Greek ideal, its canonical status, but the norms of representation tied up with it."²¹

Just who was "black" in 1980s Britain became a matter of social, cultural and political concern in terms of the prevalent discourse of anti-racism. If the black experience represented an experience in relation to a white society and its racism, then this experience could not be limited only to African and Afro-Caribbean people. Racism, in Europe, was a legacy not only of slavery but also of European colonialism, and all non-white people were subjected to its violence. For the white coloniser every colonised person was "black." In the equal opportunities forms that accompanied job applications in 1980s Britain there were many boxes for black, including black Asian, black Caribbean etc., so black was classified in terms of ethnicity. Interestingly, as Dyer points out, "white" had but one box and was seen as all-encompassing and not subject to the same classification. In my case, I ticked the "other" box and specified "Anglo-Indian." However, we were a colonised people and the product of the empire, so black after all.

The artist/curator, Rasheed Araeen, therefore argued that it was appropriate to use the term "black for people of African and Asian origins."²² While Araeen's explanation of how the term black plays out in the discourse of anti-racism is certainly broad in scope, it is also cognisant that black communities were heterogeneous and diverse. In the 1980s in Britain, therefore, "black" became a politically motivated signifier of group solidarity for black artists, rather than a descriptor of biological traits. Thus Araeen utilised the term "Black Art" in 1982 to describe those non-white artists who, despite their heterogeneity, were subject to exclusion and racism as a homogenous group.

White traditions/black artists

My own art school experience (1975-1978; 1982-1984) had consisted of the teaching of methods in oil painting and Western modernism. My lecturers were: Arnold Van Praag (born 1926) at St Albans; George Malallieu (1941-2004) and Arthur Berry (1925-94) at Stoke and Adrian Heath (1920-92) at Reading. My teachers all had important lessons for me; Van Praag used paint like a figurative modernist, but as a beginning art student I could not grasp the significance of this, although I now see it as an expression of Jewish European diaspora art. Ten years later I encountered my first black teacher when I enrolled in a library course at Ealing College. He was a “relaxed” Indian teacher of statistics, whom I liked, but I realised that his cultural difference was making the other white students uncomfortable. I asked myself why there were only a few black teachers in art schools and why the curriculum centred on Western modernism and white art.

The important lesson I learnt was that as a teacher I could do things differently and not simply reiterate my own educational experience. After leaving art school I became interested in Mughal painting and the Islamic tile design I had admired on a visit to Lahore Fort. By the mid 1980s I was teaching part-time at Adult Education Institutes in London, and since there were few black teachers I was invited to sit on a working party on Multi-Ethnic Education alongside Sarat Maharaj and Gavin Jantes, amongst others. In the studios I recognised that an exclusively Western approach to art and curriculum was inadequate for a multi-ethnic student base so I began formulating my own inter-cultural approach.



Figure 2. *Thorn in the Crown* (1984). Copyright Leslie Morgan. Printed with permission.

Like much other black art produced at that time in the UK, *Thorn in the Crown* (1984) depicted a racist attack in Reading. The title referred to a BBC drama *Jewel in the Crown*, which was one of many Raj nostalgia movies and television series in vogue during the 1980s, such as *Gandhi* (1982) and *A Passage to India* (1984), the screening of which coincided with inner city riots in black areas of Britain. Stories of empire invoking colonial stereotypes had been popular in novels from the 1850s onwards—upper class, repressed British officers suffering the white man's burden; strait-laced wives who replicated the boundaries of empire within the home; interracial sex, or the threat of it; loyal, heroic and disloyal Indians and beautiful mixed-race women.

These fictionalised accounts of Imperial Britain in the form of novels and films were the “soap” that washed much reality away, and in the context of the racial violence experienced by black migrants constituted a form of “strategic forgetting,” a form of denial. I wanted to depict skin-heads attacking an Asian man on the ground. In terms of technique, the painting is something of a *homage* to Daumier, the 19th century artist and social satirist.

The broader cultural landscape which contributed to the black renaissance in British visual arts occurred in the early 1980s, as did the art of other marginalised groups. Its roots lay in 1960s social dissent. The influence of diasporic intellectuals, such as Stuart Hall who was involved with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the *New Left Review* and who was a member of the Labour Party, contributed to changes in Britain's intellectual climate. As a result, Britain's black diaspora evolved as an outward-looking, internationalist project encompassing an approach to identity, as well as belonging and attachment to nation, that contested the imagined community of white Britain.

Growing up with the tag “immigrant” we felt confused. There was a feeling in the broader community that we were no less “immigrants” than our fathers and mothers.²³ Yet we were British born and bred and, as such, we were a feature of an emerging movement that was demonstrated by the early practice of black artists, and that encompassed a new militancy among those who had “experienced racism from childhood, that produced and defined their work”²⁴.

Creation for Liberation

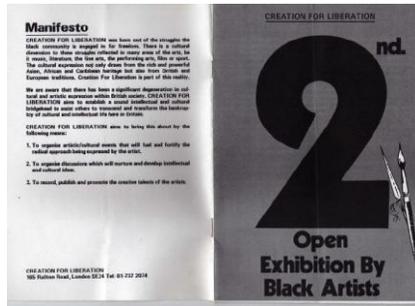


Figure 3. *Creation for Liberation Exhibition Catalogue (1984). Author's photograph. Printed with permission.*

In 1984 I exhibited at the Brixton Art Gallery in *Creation for Liberation*, curated by Araeen. My request for inclusion in this exhibition highlights the moment when I first identified as a black artist. In my letter to the curator, I asked, “could a second generation Anglo-Indian, born in Britain be black?” The response arrived in the form of exhibition details and an entry form. Although my blackness was validated through inclusion in this exhibition, this did not resolve my ambivalence concerning identity, nor the difficulty I faced in negotiating my position as an artist without a ready-made community. Nevertheless I was more than happy to participate in this emergence of art and protest.

The *Creation for Liberation* manifesto reads:

Creation for Liberation was born out of the struggles the black community is engaged in for freedom. There is a cultural dimension to these struggles reflected in many areas of the arts, be it music, literature, the fine arts, film or sport. The cultural expression not only draws from the rich Asian, African and Caribbean heritage but also from the British and European traditions. *Creation for Liberation* is part of this reality.

We are aware there has been a significant degeneration in cultural and artistic expression within British society. *CREATION FOR LIBERATION* aims to establish a sound intellectual and cultural bridgehead to assist others to transcend and transform the bankruptcy of intellectual and cultural life here in Britain.

CREATION FOR LIBERATION aims to bring this about by the following means:

To organise artistic/cultural events that will fuel and fortify the radical approach expressed by the artist.

To organise discussions which will nurture and develop intellectual and cultural ideas.

To record, publish and promote the creative talents of the artists²⁵.

The manifesto now appears radical through its inclusion of sport as a form of identity and cultural expression, but more significantly it highlights the diasporic tradition that migrant artists draw upon: the traditions of both their country of birth and the attachments to their new home. Furthermore, through the identification of a cultural and political malaise that accompanied Britain's shift to the right, it asks black artists to contribute to its reconstruction, "to establish a sound intellectual and cultural bridgehead." Thus immigrant communities were asked to take a role and be in the vanguard of a wider community change, as part of achieving a sense of belonging to it.

The work in this exhibition came largely from the Afro-Caribbean community, unsurprising since the Gallery was located in Brixton. However, Aareen included in this show his own work: a collage of refusal letters from employers and galleries surrounding his self-portrait in blue biro. One of my own entries in this exhibition was an oil painting of a woman seated in my studio, a painting lacking any signifier of otherness or political potency. However, my other entry depicted a policeman, a parked car with door open and a man lying on the ground. So in content at least this work was outwardly political.

This exhibition brought together both professional and community artists in a consciousness-raising forum. Given its diversity and openness to all forms of black artists, the exhibition was predictably uneven, although important historically in marking the emergence of black art in London. However, Black art comes of age in Britain with Aareen's groundbreaking 1989 exhibition, *The Other Story*.

The Other Story

The Other Story: Afro-Asian artists in post-war Britain, an Arts Council funded exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, was ostensibly the culmination of Aareen's activism and promotion of black artists in Britain. It was first proposed and rejected as early as 1978. After a number of years, Aareen's persistence was rewarded, and when he resubmitted the proposal in 1986,

it was approved. In many respects, Araeen's efforts to showcase black art at a major British gallery mirrored the Black Art Movement's wider struggle for access to exhibition spaces and its contestation concerning its representation. Araeen's role in advocating for black art was crucial as he "saw the omissions and distortions in the public discourse on the arts, and then not only pointed them out but proposed strategies to address them."²⁶

Seeking to address these gaps was problematic since expectations for this exhibition were high and there was a feeling that the show had to stand for all black art, which some felt was an impossible objective.²⁷ The Other Story's main agenda was to challenge "the entrenched white nationalism of British art," as black art had not been considered British art at all until this juncture.²⁸ As an art student in the late 1970s, the artists were unknown to me, but Araeen's project was to install these artists within the category of British art. In so doing, black diasporic art was to be represented as not some form of curiosity, to be dismissed as an essentialised "other," but as part of the larger narrative of British modernism. Gilroy articulated this repositioning when he claimed "we may discover that our story is not the other story after all, but the story of England in the modern world."²⁹ The aim of *The Other Story* was, therefore, not only to celebrate the achievements of black art, but also to spark a debate regarding the significance of its contribution to modernism.

Its title is double edged: on the one hand it is oppositional as it highlights black art's exclusion from the mainstream; on the other it implies that black art occupies a space outside mainstream practice, which is how Araeen defines it. In both senses, the title could be seen to confirm black art's otherness. Cultural theorist Gen Doy concurs with this reading and views it as "reinforcing the notion of black artists as different."³⁰ Indeed, it was different in the sense that it was cold-shouldered by the art establishment.

Araeen's curatorial statement claims, "my selection of artists was based on multiple factors: historical, ideological, aesthetic as well as personal."³¹ This statement is exceptional for the frankness with which it outlines the curatorial criteria. Araeen also here demonstrates the didactic nature of *The Other Story* as a critique of the very process of curation—a process usually masked under the umbrella of quality. The signifier "quality" essentially harbours the inherent biases of curatorial practice, the ideological values of the institution and arguably the dominant ideology.

Araeen's curatorial statement reads:

My main consideration was that the work must engage with the idea of modernity (or post-modernity), with its historical formations as well as its socio-cultural constraints and contradictions. It must be regret-

ted that there will inevitably be artists who did not come to my attention or whose work I did not understand, and who have been excluded; it was necessary to make a tight selection, given the limited resources and the specific objective of the project; it was never meant to represent every Afro-Asian artist irrespective of the quality or historical importance of their work.³²

The idea that the work engages with modernity is significant: it heralds black art as a platform from which to pursue modernist practice, rather than black art as a museum piece or museum artefact. Araeen argues,

It is not a question of accepting or rejecting the white culture's notion of quality in favour of some mythical black aesthetic, but of engaging and questioning the dominant artistic practice³³.

While he here acknowledges quality as a criterion for inclusion, his emphasis is clearly political in intent.

In accepting Araeen's proposal for *The Other Story* the South Bank centre's decision to go ahead with the exhibition was essentially an act of benign tolerance. The exhibition catalogue introduction inadvertently confirms this by stating "We believe this to be a necessary and overdue exhibition, but we also expect it to be judged by normal criteria."³⁴ The "normal criteria" invoked here is the very criterion of Britishness and whiteness that the exhibition sought to contest. The "normal criteria" also provided ammunition for the savage critical reception of *The Other Story*, which indicated that Britain in 1989 was still unable to acknowledge black artists who were constructing British art.

The Other Story was "an attempt to illustrate the contribution and relationship to European modernist art by 'Afro-Asian artists,'"³⁵ as well as being an exhibition that "open[ed] up an understanding of modernism."³⁶ Thus the category of modernism itself was under scrutiny by black artists who demanded incorporation into the narrative of British art. While Powell's "imagined community" excluded blacks, the diasporic perspective was concerned with constructing its own "imagined community," not as an essential category, but as a platform for the rethinking cultural difference, belonging, and "blackness in relation to Britishness."³⁷ The black artists who had been ghettoised, were now, according to the tenets of postmodernism, as decentred as white artists. However the playing field was never going to be a level one. Black art's diasporic aesthetic began to widen its scope, as it had to critically examine black people's cultural positionality. This required not only a re-examination of being black and British, but also black and European.³⁸

The Other Story was divided into four sections, representing the

frameworks of modernism, conceptualism, oppositional and metaphorical work. Araeen emphasised that these categories did not represent exclusive categories since the “work [was] not ‘a fixed’ cultural practice but a part of the socio-historical changes that have taken place in the last 50 years or so.”³⁹

The first section, “In the Citadel of Modernism” included Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002) and Ahmed Parvez (1926-79). Souza had arrived as an immigrant in the 1950s and had had some commercial success, but no critical acclaim. By contrast, Parvez considered himself a failure, since he never achieved recognition in his lifetime. Araeen describes meeting Parvez in Karachi.

He showed me a large suitcase full of papers, letters and diaries, all of which he wanted to publish one day. It was during this encounter that I realised how real his suffering was. I think he knew he had failed all the time in his ambition; and it was this sense of ‘failure’ that I believe often drove him to the kind of madness that ultimately killed him.⁴⁰

This moving account of a defeated artist who harbours a sense of failure due to a lack of recognition is reminiscent of the treatment of other artists experiencing the same fate, most notably Jewish-British artist David Bomberg (1890-1957), who was excluded from the anti-semitic British art establishment.

The second section, “Taking the Bull by the Horns” featured the conceptual work of Iqbal Geoffrey (born 1939). As a lawyer and accountant, Geoffrey was able to earn a living outside art and so did not fall victim to the self-perceived “failure” of Parvez. He had seven one-man shows and received critical acclaim within three years of arriving in the country in 1959. In 1984 he accused the National Gallery in London of racism when he was denied the artist-in-residence position.⁴¹ The Industrial Tribunal dismissed his case “but Geoffrey achieved his aim with style: widespread publicity, including television coverage that enabled him to cock a snook at the establishment.”⁴²

The third section, “Confronting the System” included openly oppositional work by Gavin Jantes (born 1948), a “Cape Coloured” from South Africa. This work speaks of loss and displacement and at the same time tackles an interrogation of Western power and thought. Mona Hatoum (born 1952), a Palestinian new media artist, used her body as a metaphor to explore displacement and exile. Also included in this section was work by Eddie Chambers, the co-founder of the Midlands BLK Art Group, which included Keith Piper, Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith and Donald Rodney,

Nina Edge, Ingrid Pollard, Jennifer Comrie, Mowbray Odonkor, Veronica Ryan, Maud Sulter, Chila Kumari Burman.⁴³

Chamber's *Destruction of the NF* (1979-80) expresses the anger and confusion of a child of immigrants who was told to "go back to your own country." This work is emblematic of 1980s back art, as it incorporates critique of racism and policing. It is therefore unsurprising that its depiction was of central concern in the fire-storm years of protest marches, petitions, smash-ups, burn outs, sit downs as Black and Asian areas of English cities cried out against unacceptable conditions, racist violence and policing.⁴⁴

Chambers utilised collage, montage and bricolage as a disruptive pictorial strategy. Piper, in contrast, worked with the vernacular and appropriated "Denis the Menace" from the *Beano*, a children's comic and the Golliwog from the Robinson's jam jar. These methodologies had some similarities with the 1960s Pop Art approach in British art. By contrast, the 1980s experience of Jantes, Piper, Chambers, amongst others, was openly confrontational and oppositional. *Destruction of the National Front* is an attack on the Union Jack resulting in a literal and metaphoric reconfigured flag, however it remains a fragmented image and, as such, is emblematic of black art as a diasporic and hybrid art form; it is about how black art has "entered into these traditions and changed them."⁴⁵

Araeen's inclusion of new media artists such as Piper, exemplifies a trajectory of black art from the embodied plastic arts of painting and sculpture in early 1980s to film and video in the latter part of that decade, and it attracted a new and mainstream audience for his work. Piper's response to Thatcherism's new authoritarianism was to position race as central to the construction of the dangerous "other."

One of few British women artists included, Sonia Boyce (born 1962), was represented in this section by realist pastel drawings that refer to the diasporic experience, particularly in terms of her gender.

One feature of the work in this section is the use of collage, and a "cut 'n' mix" aesthetic, also evident in hip-hop music's use of sampling and digital media that is akin to the "collage and the linguistic play" that Volosinov describes as surfacing in language.⁴⁶ In this sense, collage is used not to fragment but as a tool for centring diasporic practice as it "informs the narration of stories precisely hidden from history in dominant discourses of the past."⁴⁷

The final section, "Recovering Cultural Metaphors" focused on how artists responded to cultural difference and their positioning within modernism. Included in this section was Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-85), an accomplished writer and artist in India whose response to displacement was to abandon his previous practices when he arrived in Britain in the 1950s

and to start again.

There was a sense of urgency raised by *The Other Story* which was the result of decades of marginalisation.⁴⁸ Given the highly contentious nature of the exhibition, Araeen rightly anticipated a critical backlash from conservative critics, as well as from the black art community itself. As a result the project's aim to situate black art within the framework of British modernism was not so much lost as weakened. Mercer notes that there were implicit expectations in some circles that the exhibition would demonstrate the totality or history of black art practice. At the very least those artists selected would be viewed by the public as being somehow representative of black art. This, in itself, was problematic.

Araeen's claim to speak for the excluded "other" was also problematic. Situpa Biswas (born 1962) correctly noted that black women were under-represented. In addition, the question of which artist was best able to represent a particular community called into question the responsibility of the artist in relation to his/her community, and several successful black artists including Indian born artist and Turner Prize winner Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary, Dhruva Mistry, Kim Lim and Veronica Ryan actually declined to show their work as part of *The Other Story*.

Araeen was also accused of using "white/western standards"⁴⁹ to exclude black artists from the exhibition. In reply Araeen argued that he would never include work "regardless of their artistic or aesthetic merits"⁵⁰ thereby contradicting his earlier claim by invoking the notion of quality. However, Araeen defines quality by reiterating art's "complex institutional function in relation to the ideology or worldview of the society in which art is produced and to which it is attributed as its creation."⁵¹

While Araeen does, therefore, invoke quality as a criterion to assess work, his application of the normative standards of modernism to art considered "other" was arguably a factor in critic Peter Fuller's dismissive response to *The Other Story*—he accused Araeen of inverted racism and maintained that the curatorial rationale was flawed since its "criteria for inclusion are explicitly and exclusively racial."⁵² Fuller, whose conversion from radical politics to a more conservative worldview incorporating a pastoral notion of Englishness, was thus unable to recognise a new category of post-war Britishness, which he dismissed outright. He is quoted as claiming that "much of the work Araeen has reinstated is quite simply of little, if any, aesthetic or artistic value."⁵³ His lack of empathy and narrow view of art practice made him unable to respond sensitively to, or theorise art that emerged from a diasporic perspective.

Critic Brian Sewell argued that the works in *The Other Story* were simply derivative. From this perspective, the reason the works were not ac-

claimed is “they are not good enough. They borrow all and contribute nothing.”⁵⁴ The phrase “borrow all and contribute nothing” has the toxic resonance of Enoch Powell’s rhetoric in the framing of immigrants and their cultural production as unformed, excessive and sponging off the state. Sewell dismissively proceeded: “the work of Afro-Asian artists in the West are no more than a curiosity, not yet worth even a footnote in any history of 20th century western art.”⁵⁵ That Sewell views black art as “no more than a curiosity” has tones of the colonial about it; black art is not British at all and in keeping with the colonial view, he can only see diasporic work as being second hand, the work of mimic men.

Conclusion

Mercer’s seminal essay “Black Art and the Burden of Representation” (1990) explores the “articulation of debates surrounding art, race and representation in Britain at the end of the 1980s.”⁵⁶ Mercer points to the inherent difference between the positions of black artists and those of white British artists. His main argument is that while black artists in the 1980s were “obliged” to speak on behalf of a heterogeneous collective and respond to the perceived responsibility of the artist, the social role of the host artist as a “given” is always assumed. While this “burden” is part of a temporary strategy on the path to recognition, it emerged through a visual recombination described by Stuart Hall as “black diasporisation.”⁵⁷

It has been argued that black artists today no longer feel any responsibility at all *vis a vis* their community, so they are in this sense, on a level playing field with “host” artists. So, whereas the burden of black art in the 1980s was formative, a decade or two later cultural difference has become highly marketable, and in fact “difference” *per se* has become unmentionable.

The Other Story poses the pertinent question: “why were black artists invisible and excluded?” Araeen suggests that invisibility denies black artists their own particularity and pushes Afro-Asian artists into “communal and essentialist cultural frameworks”⁵⁸ thereby removing them from authentic, (or Western) notions of modernism. Having judged the work inauthentic, it can then be banished to the margins and ignored, declined textual analysis, and silenced.

One of the key issues raised by The Other Story relates to terminology: what is actually meant by “black art”? Chambers first used the term “black art” in 1981 as a way of confronting the white establishment with its racism, as much as addressing the black community in its struggle for human equality.⁵⁹ Thus black art performed a dual role in highlighting the in-

stitutional racism encountered by black artists. Chambers, however, places greater emphasis on the relationship between black art and the black community.

Although I agree with Chamber's analysis generally, I want to engage with what he terms the "black community," since it is clearly erroneous to consider any community in terms of homogeneity, although communities might form due to common features. Chambers assumes that the black community is interested in black art. Somewhat optimistically, Chambers positions black art as a conduit between the artist and the black community. In his view, black art's opposition to "white art" or mainstream practice raised consciousness among a (black) audience in the struggle against marginalisation. It could, however, also be argued that the community was insouciant about black art, and furthermore that the audience for black arts was in fact white.⁶⁰

Maharaj unravels the complexity of black art's seemingly oppositional stance to argue that the relationship that black artists have with the given field of representation they interrogate, questions the very premise of an essential black sensibility. Maharaj states:

[T]o dismiss the mode's prickly, interrogating, often angry thrust is to disregard the kind of world it sought to challenge and oppose—one where immigrants felt silenced, hemmed in, subordinated.⁶¹

Araeen links the art of Newton Souza, Chandra, and Parvez to modernism, even though they exert agency in what Maharaj calls a "prickly" and "interrogating" manner. He also describes how some of these artists gained brief recognition based on their perceived otherness and then they were ignored.

The exhibitions *Creation for Liberation* and *The Other Story* confronted the notion of competing modernities and strove to give voice to those other modernities hitherto omitted from the Western master narrative because of institutional racism. In this sense, diasporic art is a counter-discourse to modernity. It demonstrates a "critical intervention within the trajectory of twentieth-century modernism," and its achievement is to "intervene and disrupt the established order of white avant-garde."⁶² Its contribution has global significance, especially in terms of cultural decolonisation.

By locating black art's counter hegemonic strategy in its diversity, *The Other Story* charted the shift from essentialist notions of fixed identity "towards a more relational view of plural identities constructed from the Caribbean, South Asian and African migrations of the post-war era."⁶³

The celebration of the success of black art by 1990 can be viewed as progressive. As a consequence, the negative experiences of some artists

in the 1950s were cast a thing of the past. However, the questions posed concerning the incorporation of black artists into the mainstream, on terms dictated by the institutions, can be viewed as “a triumph of the system.”⁶⁴ Araeen is critical of the process of the entry and assimilation of a selected few black artists into the mainstream, since the gesture, while celebrating the success of these few artists, does so “without upsetting the dominant structure of the art institution and its ideology.”⁶⁵ Therefore it would appear that the imagined community of the art world has remained essentially unchanged since the 1980s.

The perceived gains made by the black art movement and other minority discourses may not turn out to be as significant as once proposed. One needs to revisit the postmodernist debates concerning the decentring of modernism to explain how this might be the case. The proclaimed “end of everything” of postmodernism was in some ways viewed as empowering for minority discourses, which could now become central. However, it also de-politicised all forms of debate. At a time when minorities were demanding a room in the house of modernism, the very house itself was being disassembled and transported to an undisclosed destination in the early hours, like a Queensland home on a semi-trailer. An oppositional approach required a fixed target, not one that was mobile. Therefore the process of decentring was viewed as akin to a goal post shifting exercise, with the aim of augmenting the exclusion of minorities. In other words, the process of decentring the subject politically was viewed “as a means to once again undermine the black subject.”⁶⁶

Many of the 1980s artists involved have forged careers and their achievements are rightly recognised. However, it remains the case that migrants and “post-colonials” are often destined to fail in the culture game. They are left with three options; “to take a fall with as much grace as the doomed can muster, or to self-exoticise and humour the establishment for a chance at that brief nod, or else fail the hard way.”⁶⁷

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NOTES

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- ² Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1997), 216.
- ³ West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," 216.
- ⁴ John Solomos et al., "The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: the experience of the seventies," in ed. CCCS, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, (Birmingham: CCCS 1982), 85.
- ⁵ Sarat Maharaj, "The Congo is Flooding the Metropolis," *Third Text* 15 (1991): 80.
- ⁶ Maharaj, "The Congo is Flooding the Metropolis," 80.
- ⁷ Benjamin Bowling, "The emergence of violent racism as a public issue in Britain, 1945-81," in *Racial Violence in Britain*, ed. Panikos Panayi (Leicester: Leicester University Press 1993), 186.
- ⁸ Bowling, "The emergence of violent racism as a public issue in Britain," 187.
- ⁹ Panikos Panayi, "Anti-immigrant violence in nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain," in *Racial Violence in Britain*, ed. Panikos Panayi (Leicester: Leicester University Press 1993), 18.
- ¹⁰ John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, (London: Macmillan, 1989), 49.
- ¹¹ Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 49.
- ¹² Enoch Powell, *1968 Speech*, <http://www.natfront.com/powell.html>, accessed 16 Sept 2006.
- ¹³ Dave Renton, http://www.whenwetouchedthesky.com/anl_arts02.html, accessed 2 Feb 2006.
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- ¹⁵ Solomos et al., "The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: the experience of the seventies," 25.
- ¹⁶ Solomos et al., "The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: the experience of the seventies," 25.
- ¹⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8645485.stm
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- 18 http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/25/newsid_2546000/2546233.stm, accessed 11 March 2011.
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- 20 Bowling was eventually elected to the Royal Academy in 2005 and received an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2008.
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- 24 Araeen, "The Success and Failure of Black Art," 142.
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- ⁴⁴ Sarat Maharaj, "Black Art's Autobiography," in *Run Through the Jungle*, eds. G. Tawadros and V. Clark (London: IIVA, 1999), 5.
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- ⁴⁶ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 269.
- ⁴⁷ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 269.
- ⁴⁸ Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 10 (1990): 62.
- ⁴⁹ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 22-3.
- ⁵⁰ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 22.
- ⁵¹ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 22.
- ⁵² Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," 61.
- ⁵³ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 24.
- ⁵⁴ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 26.
- ⁵⁵ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 26.
- ⁵⁶ Tolia-Kelly and D. Morris, *Disruptive Aesthetics? Revisiting the Burden of Representation in the Art of Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare* 153.
- ⁵⁷ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Race, Culture and Difference*, eds. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage, 2002), 252-9.
- ⁵⁸ Araeen, "The Other Immigrant," 19.
- ⁵⁹ Araeen and Chambers, "Black Art, A Discussion," 52.
- ⁶⁰ Maharaj, "The Congo is Flooding the Metropolis," 86.
- ⁶¹ Maharaj, "The Congo is flooding the Acropolis," 86.
- ⁶² Araeen, "The Success and Failure of Black Art," 147.
- ⁶³ Kobena Mercer, "Ethnicity and Internationality: new British Art and Diaspora based blackness," in eds. R. Araeen, S. Cubitt and S. Ziuddin, *Third Text Reader* (London: continuum 2002), 119.
- ⁶⁴ Rasheed Araeen, "The Art of Benevolent Racism," *Third Text* 51 (2000): 58.
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- ⁶⁷ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 2004), 33.