

**Sir Lenny Henry, Amma Asante, Afua Hirsch,  
Kurt Barling, Chi Thai and Delphine Lievens,  
Nina Robinson, David Hevey, Melanie Gray,  
Debbie Christie, Gary Younge, Adrian Lester,  
So Mayer, Siobhán McGuirk,  
Selina Nwulu, Ciaran Thapar**

**The Journal  
of Media and  
Diversity**

**Issue 02**  
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**PRESENT  
OLOGY**

# REPRESENTOLOGY

The Journal of Media and Diversity

## Editorial Mission Statement

**Welcome to Representology**, a journal dedicated to research and best-practice perspectives on how to make the media more representative of all sections of society.

A starting point for effective representation are the “protected characteristics” defined by the Equality Act 2010 including, but not limited to, race, gender, sexuality, and disability, as well as their intersections. We recognise that definitions of diversity and representation are dynamic and constantly evolving and our content will aim to reflect this.

**Representology** is a forum where academic researchers and media industry professionals can come together to pool expertise and experience. We seek to create a better understanding of the current barriers to media participation as well as examine and promote the most effective ways to overcome such barriers. We hope the journal will influence policy and practice in the media industry through a rigorous, evidence-based approach.

Our belief is that a more representative media workforce will enrich and improve media output, enabling media organisations to better serve their audiences, and encourage a more pluralistic and inclusive public discourse. This is vital for a healthy society and well-functioning democracy. We look forward to working with everyone who shares this vision.



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University



**Representology is a collaboration  
between Birmingham City University  
and Cardiff University**

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# EDITORIAL

**Welcome to Issue Two of *Representology* - *The Journal of Media and Diversity*. Since we launched, many of you have shared encouraging words and ideas on how to help create a media more reflective of modern Britain.**

On March 30th, we hosted our first public event - an opportunity for all those involved to spell out their visions for the journal and answer your questions. As Editor, I chaired a wide-ranging conversation on 'Race and the British Media' with Sir Lenny Henry, Leah Cowan, and Marcus Ryder. Our discussions and the responses to illuminating audience interventions gave us a theme that runs through this issue - capturing experiences and documenting struggles. As illustrated in a number of the following articles, people have been fighting for decades to push for positive change within established institutions in press and broadcasting. Over the years, there have been great victories - however, in many instances, media workers who have raised concerns about poor work and hiring practices have had doors slammed in their faces.

We have found a willingness from people - experienced equal rights campaigners around disability and race, for gay and women's liberation - to share their stories in our journal, buttressed by exclusive and robust academic research. We include these pieces not as mere reminiscences - we hope to play a role in confronting institutional amnesia and inspire a new generation of media professionals to diversify their industry. Meaningful change to the media can only come about if we break down existing barriers and build on the work of those who went before us.

In the previous edition of *Representology*, we invited applicants to join our editorial board, and I am delighted to welcome its three newest members - Dr Wanda Wyporska, Lucy Brown and Alison Wilde - who between them bring a wealth of experience to this developing project. As ever, if you are interested in contributing, or wish to send your views and suggestions for future issues, please write to us: [Representology@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Representology@bcu.ac.uk)

**K Biswas**  
Editor



# DEVELOPING FILM

**Sir Lenny Henry** in conversation with award winning filmmaker **Amma Asante** on successful period dramas, steadfast mentors, and sharing power on the silver screen.

Amma Asante is a BAFTA award-winning filmmaker. This is a transcript of a conversation which took place over Zoom on 8th June 2021, produced and edited by **Marcus Ryder**

## **Lenny:**

LENNY: Hi, Amma, thank you so much for agreeing to chat with me today for our brilliant new journal, Representology. We believe that leading artists like yourself have invaluable knowledge about how to make our industry more diverse and inclusive. In my mind, it is all about recording, and then circulating, that knowledge and experience to as wide an audience as possible, making sure we don't repeat the mistakes that have happened before, and building on our successes.

**Representation matters - drama has impact**

## **Lenny:**

Let's try and unlock some of your success, as you are one of the most important and influential Black British directors of recent years. I first came across you on the BBC's legendary series *Grange Hill*, on which you were working as a child actor. I also remember you working as an intern on *Chef* [a 1990s BBC comedy-drama, starring Lenny Henry, written by Peter Tilbury]. So, was there always a plan for you to



make the leap from appearing on-screen to working behind the camera? Tell us a little about your journey from being a drama school kid to being one of our most important Black British female directors.

**Amma:** There was definitely no master plan. I attended Barbara Speake [Stage School] because my dad noticed, when I was at primary school in South London, that I was really creative. But I was also quite shy. I was very outgoing at home, and in my mum and dad's shop, which they had in Shepherds Bush, but I was not outgoing in school.

My dad was really good at looking at what each of his children was good at, and [at] trying to push us towards that. For example, my brother's a biochemist now, and, at an early age, my dad was always buying him chemistry kits.

So, he knew of a couple of stage schools, but he wanted me to go to one that was the most multicultural, that had a percentage of Black kids. They didn't want me to go to a place where I'd be the only Black kid there. And so I went to Barbara Speake's. And when I got there, Kwame Kwei-Armah was there, Naomi Campbell was there and Michelle Gayle was there. But, in the beginning, I was terrified. It was all too much. It was like The Kids from "Fame" [cast members from the 1980s American TV drama set in a stage school].

**Lenny:** Kids dancing on taxis in the street in leg-warmers and leotards, yelling "Let's do the show right here"?

**Amma:** Exactly! I mean, literally! I walked in and there were all these kids in leotards in the assembly hall. There were kids rehearsing what we used to call an "own show", which was a show that the kids produced for themselves. It was a lunch break, and they were all rehearsing and doing splits in the air, and all of that. And I begged my dad for a full seven months to take me out of the school. Then, suddenly, one day I became one of those kids doing splits in the air, and you're one of those kids who knows how to be one of The Kids from "Fame", and you're talking like everybody else, and suddenly I was a bit more out of myself – not as much as everybody else – but I was one of them.

**Lenny:** So, you were finally fitting in. You've said in past interviews that you realised the power of drama during this time. Can you explain?

**Amma:** Actually, I didn't ever want to act. I did *Grange Hill*. I was surrounded by kids who could act, and I could see what good acting looked like. I knew I couldn't do that. I was too self-aware. I probably lacked confidence as well. But I was blown away by Lee MacDonald, who played Zammo at the time, and he had a harrowing storyline in my final year [about childhood drug addiction]. And I was also blown away by the impact of the story on the community.

I'd go back to my own community in South London, and I could see the impact, particularly the Heroin storyline, was having with kids I went to school with previously, in my primary school, and that blew me away.

The storyline also led me, and the other *Grange Hill* kids, to go to the White House and meet Nancy Reagan and to appear on news channels in the US and UK.

## The importance of women and diversity in positions of influence

**Lenny:** But I understand it could have all ended at that point.

**Amma:** After *Grange Hill*, I effectively stopped acting when I got to around 19. I did a little bit of presenting with Lee MacDonald on the Children's Channel. And various other things, like a bit in one episode of *Desmond's* [a 1990s Channel 4 comedy set in a Black British barber shop], but mainly because I didn't know how to do anything else.

When all my friends had gone to university, I hadn't. My mum was terrified that my dad had sort of led me down this road, where I had not got an education, the kind of education that she wanted me to get. So, she begged me to go to hairdressing college, where I was promptly kicked out.

And then she begged me to go to secretarial college, which was the big turning point for me. I'd read an article somewhere in *Cosmopolitan* or *Pride*, or one of the women's magazines, that said that Black women, at that time, actually did really well in particular areas of administration and particular areas of lower management,

and I thought; “Oh, maybe that’s a trajectory that I can follow.” For me, that just demonstrates why all these statements and things that we read, even when we’re 15, 16, 17 years old, really go on to impact us and make a difference, one way or another, because that’s where I thought; “Okay, maybe there’s a world where I can keep a roof over my head, you know, in that way.”

And so I was trying to get my typing speed up. I would do copy typing. And then I would just type off the top of my head, and something I typed off the top of my head was a script called *Soul Difference*. And, in the back of my mind, I thought I was typing out a half hour sitcom, but it came out at something like two hours by

Fox. And, Lenny, let me tell you, I turned up at Fox Studios in Los Angeles in cut down jeans and a cut down t-shirt, because I was on holiday at the time.

I was in my very early twenties, and had no idea that I was turning up to a whole professional studio meeting, because I had no concept of American studios, or what those kinds of professional meetings were like. But, as I say, I had gone to the US on holiday, and I only had holiday clothes with me. So, I go in, and I see these two executives and these two development executives, they’re both women! I just thought, “Wow!!” They were amazing. They changed my life, because they said to me: “we love what you’ve written, and you can write,

Mick Pilsworth, at Chrysalis Entertainment. And Mick said to me; “Did you really write this?” And I said, “Yes, I did write it.” And he said, “Okay, well, let’s talk about what we can do”. And he then sent it to Channel Four’s Commissioning Editor, Seamus Cassidy. That’s how I got my first seven script deal with Channel Four.

That was how it started. I stopped acting fully at that point. It dawned on me when I got into my twenties, that I was only doing it because it’s something that I’d sort of been put into as a child, as opposed to choosing it. My Dad understood I needed an outlet for my creativity, but I had to figure out exactly what that outlet should be.

**Lenny:** I liken the experience to climbing a ladder up the side of a big house - you get to the roof, look across, and see another house. A bigger and better house. Then, you slap yourself on the forehead and say, “My ladder was against the wrong house! That’s the house I want over there!”

**Amma:** Precisely, writing made me feel so good. And it made me feel like I imagined good actors feel, because when I was writing, I could express what I wanted to express. Whereas when I was acting, I couldn’t. There wasn’t any story I wanted to tell as an actor, but plenty I wanted to tell as a writer.

## The qualities of a good mentor

**Lenny:** But, again, it could have all come to nothing – is that right?

**Amma:** I went through three years of development work, and then a new commissioning editor came in, with a new broom, and everything was swept out.

I’d also got a development deal on a sitcom I created, called *Ladies in the House*, at the BBC. And I can’t actually remember if it was the Beeb or Channel 4, but one of them had given me a mentor, called Paul Mayhew-Archer, and that was a beautiful experience. He’s a great guy. He was so brilliant and clever at just getting me to express what was locked inside the characters, and what I wanted to pull out. And so, the experience was so positive, it was so brilliant. He was such a good mentor, though neither project was made.

And so, today, when I speak to students, I always say to them, that there is no wasted piece of work. There is no point in saying, “Well, this didn’t get made, or this didn’t get done,” or saying “I wasted three years on that.”. Because I couldn’t have made *Belle*, I couldn’t have made any of the films I’ve made without going through all the processes that I went through in those early stages. I just couldn’t have done them. I couldn’t have simply arrived fully baked.

## And I felt listened to, and that somebody was actually encouraging me, or telling me; “you are good, and there is a possibility that you might be better”.

the time I finished it. It was about my life at home with my parents. The mother in it was my mum. The dad was my dad. And the girl in it was me.

I’d not so long before met a producer, called Chuck Sutton, in the States. His uncle was Malcolm X’s lawyer, and his family owned the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. I gave him the script to read, and Chuck read it, and said, “This is really good”. And he set up a meeting for me at

and you’re really good. And they talk to me about the characters, and they talk to me about the world I’d built in the script. And, suddenly, I was talking about creative stuff. And I felt listened to, and that somebody was actually encouraging me, or telling me; “you are good, and there is a possibility that you might be better”.

So, I came back to the UK and pinpointed a producer that I wanted to send my script to, who was called

**Lenny:** Mentoring is really important. I think what you said about Paul Mayhew-Archer really resonates with me. Often people get the whole mentor/mentee relationship wrong. It shouldn't just be about having someone who can help you make things better. You also need to be able to allow your mentee to make mistakes. And then let them figure it out for themselves. A mentor's job isn't to come in to save you, or to move you out of the way and say: "Let me rewrite that for you," or, "Let me redesign that piece of complex machinery for you." A mentor should be saying: "Okay, what do 'you' think you should do?"

**Amma:** Absolutely. Absolutely! The same is true for all the best producers I've had over the years. For my first film, for instance, my producer, Peter Edwards, the Head of ITV Wales, wasn't officially my mentor, but he sort of was, because he would do it. He would ask questions. All his notes were questions.

I would get on the train back from Wales. And I'd spend two hours with maybe one question spinning around in my head. Like, one of these questions would spin around, spin around, spin around, and I'd wake up the next morning, and something would just click, and then I'd go back and I would do a whole new draft. And it would just get better and better, based on these conversations that we'd have about life. They'd be about his family, they'd be about my family, they'd be about, you know, "where

does an African family overlap with a white Welsh family?" say. You know, and, all of those conversations about the 'specific' and the 'universal' and how the 'detail' is what makes a story that resonate. That's what allowed me to create the film *A Way of Life*.

## Do not pigeonhole Black talent

**Lenny:** *A Way of Life* (written and directed by Amma Asante, 2004) went on to win a BAFTA. And it was extraordinary, because I'm pretty sure it wasn't what people were expecting from you - something so dark and complex.

**Amma:** I really wanted to escape the prescription of what people thought you should make, as a Black person.

**Lenny:** But it seems to me that the projects you undertake are always stories from a unique perspective. And I'm fascinated by that.

**Amma:** With *A Way of Life*, I wanted to go down the road where I could express an experience that I recognise, but I wanted to tell it from the point of view of the people who put me through that experience - to be the observer and, yes, even the commentator, if you like.

So, growing up in South London, where we were harangued as one of only two black families on the street. You know, my Virgo brain was like; "What makes people do that, what is the reasoning behind it?" And my brain was growing up,

gaining a perspective, and was becoming more buried in writing, which meant I was becoming more buried in research, which meant I was becoming more buried in politics, and I was becoming more buried in how societies are built, and how societal symptoms sometimes manifest.... not to say that racism is only a symptom but, in the context of the world I had grown up in, racism was partly a symptom. And, therefore, I wondered what -- could -- be some of the causes? And, as human beings, where does the responsibility of the individual stop and the responsibility of the state and society begin, and *vice versa*.

*A Way of Life* was actually dealing more with poverty and exclusion, and specifically the underclass, than anything else. Everyone in it is trying to survive. That popular saying; "Stop and smell the roses", when I was researching the film, I was, like, "Man, how is a person who doesn't even know where the next bottle of milk is coming from to feed her baby, supposed to be expected to stop and smell the roses?" In certain situations, that's like a privilege, beyond anything you could possibly imagine.

You know, when I was growing up, people who had roses in their gardens were rich. To this day, my mother-in-law has roses in her garden. And she's not rich at all. But I still think of it as such a kind of decadent luxury. I've got roses in my house right now, and I always think of them as a luxury, they're a big deal for me. And so, I started to read up and I learned that if you have an [coin or key fed] electricity meter in your home, you pay more per unit of electricity than if you just pay a quarterly bill - at least that was the case when I was making the film.

**Lenny:** So, you wanted to write about systemic poverty. The things that keep people poor. The inability of some people to escape a life like that. It's a generational issue as much as anything else.

When I first met you, you were quite young, and my initial impression was that you were so serious. I was like, "That Amma, man, she's carrying the world on her shoulders, she's got to get these ideas out there, otherwise she would explode!"

**Amma:** I did feel like that, because society keeps certain worlds that once functioned marginalised, right? You take away everything that allowed them to function. You take away work, you take away the libraries, you take away once decent schools - because everybody who supported them has moved out. You cut them off, and then, when immigrants, like my parents and yours, move in, and children of immigrants like us - we get the blame for what society's, structures and governments have taken from those communities.

And then, because you've got no education, you've got multi-generational poverty, you're talking about worlds where kids don't even remember their parents working, sometimes, if unemployment is also multi-generational. Then you've got grandparents who lived next door, who remember a time when these environments were functioning and where these



were once working communities, that made sense, right? And now they don't make any sense anymore.

And my producer, Peter Edwards, and I, would talk about whether we're the children of immigrants, or not, in communities like the one in *A Way of Life*, we are talking about parents and children who are now living in non-functioning communities.

## The difficulty of building on success as a Black woman

**Lenny:** What you are describing is a hybrid between class and systemic racism. *A Way of Life* won multiple awards. You won the Alfred Dunhill UK Film Talent award, the Carl Foreman Award, The Times Breakthrough Artist of the Year. It was extraordinary, the amount of attention your first film brought you. And, I presume, all these accolades gave you a platform that would lead to your second film, *Belle*.

**Amma:** Well, you know what, Lenny, in many ways it did, but in other ways it was very, very tough. All the fuss went away, after the *Southbank Show* awards, and the BAFTA Awards and the FIPRESCI Awards around the world - there was all of that for about a year. And then, after that settled down, and I went and started writing what became my fourth film, and I started banging on those doors, and they were like concrete, they didn't move.

Nothing was happening at all. I didn't expect it all to sort of fall in my lap. But I just expected to get my foot in the door, so I could sit and have conversations, and talk to people about what I'd like to do next, and that just wasn't happening.

**Lenny:** So why? Why do you think that had happened?

**Amma:** I think that there was just a sense that I was a one hit wonder. I was an anomaly. I didn't look like directors were supposed to look, I was both female and black. You have to remember there was no Steve McQueen directing movies when I won my first BAFTA, there was wonderful Ngozi [Onwurah], the first Black British woman to have a feature film made. There were the two of us, and I didn't know of anyone else at that particular point.

**Lenny:** In America, in the 90s, it seemed as though the film industry was overrun by all these independent films by black filmmakers. Like Julie Dash and Matty Rich and Darnell Martin and Leslie Harris. But you're right, I think what happened with those filmmakers - apart from Spike Lee, of course - is that a lot of them made one film that managed to make some money. And then, once the initial fanfare about 'new and exciting Black filmmakers' was over, it was very difficult for them to carve out any kind of career, or even get a second film financed.<sup>1</sup>

**Amma:** It is hard, it is very hard, it is also hard for some white guys, who drop away before the sophomore movie. But once you put Black and female, once you put in that intersection, it was an absolute no-no. And, where we're at today, there is at least some recognition of that, that tragedy and horror, and there is some acceptance by the gatekeepers that that's what they did. And nobody cared, nobody gave a damn that there were large elements of British talent that were falling by the wayside.

So [after my first film], I did get some work from America. Universal actually developed something with

**... I was, like, "Man, how is a person who doesn't even know where the next bottle of milk is coming from to feed her baby, supposed to be expected to stop and smell the roses?"**

me, and Robert Jones who'd left the UK Film Council, who was a British producer, he developed something with me. And then, around 2008, we hit a financial crash in the UK. And lots and lots of production companies went down the drain, both in America and the UK. And, at that particular point, I sort of thought: "O.K., that's the end." All three of my projects just crashed. And one of them had been announced at Cannes; we were going to make *Where Hands Touch* - loads of noise, some of the trades ran it. And that crashed, and it was tough, you know, because I hadn't

sort of been through that process before. Now, I've been through it a million times. But, at that time, I hadn't been through it before. And I just thought, it's time to go now. I've really tried hard. I've really done my best. There's nothing I can do. And so, I was all ready to bow out and go back to secretarial school again. And then Damian Jones came to me with a picture postcard, in 2009, of the painting that became what I adapted into *Belle*.

Damian had tried to make it elsewhere, as a TV film, and it hadn't worked. And the Film Council said, you know,

**Lenny:** Was it already written? Did you have to write it solo?

**Amma:** I had to write the film we made – 18 drafts. But what happened was that the person who had worked with the producer to try to get a version off the ground with HBO was able to take me to her guild in America, and got the full writing credit for everything I did. I did talk about it in the press, and for a long time, the experience was extremely painful. It stopped me from being able to write for a period, because every time I put pen to paper, the stress of it was terrible. I lost my hair. It was

**I have got to a place where I understand that unless I acknowledge certain of my achievements . . . then perhaps no one else will.**

"Go to Amma and see what she makes of it. She's obsessed with the period and she's obsessed with gender." I'd previously tried to make something set around the same period, and the BFI had rejected it. It was around gender, it was a very feminist piece. And so they said, you know, "if Amma says yes, we might make this," and they did – they stuck to their promise. And so the process of making and developing it was not difficult.

really awful. But I got to a place, I would say in the last 24 months, where I realised it really doesn't matter. Because all of the body of work that I'm creating, when I'm gone, anybody who looks at the work will know what is Amma, and what that means. Everybody that needs to, knows what my voice sounds like, what it feels like, what it makes them feel like, or not..

## Black characters in period dramas

**Lenny:** I'm so glad you mentioned *Belle* - I got so much from that movie. And I have to ask, and I ask with great respect and a little trepidation: Did you enjoy *Bridgerton*? Ahhhh man! I'm telling you, I'm betting the producers of that show must have watched *Belle* nine hundred times and said, "We should do sump'n like what Amma did! But there's gotta be more black folks in it!" What I really want to know is, if you were doing *Belle* now, would you cast more black performers in it?

**Amma:** Oh, well, first of all, Shonda Rhimes [the executive producer of *Bridgerton*] is brilliant. When *Belle* came out, she put a tweet out saying, "Run, don't walk to the movie theatre to see *Belle*." Which was really lovely.

**Lenny:** You obviously planted a seed in her head.

**Amma:** And, I'm proud of that. And we [Asante and Rhimes] did something a few weeks ago with Gloria Steinem's Women's Media Centre, which is an organisation based in New York, and sort of does a similar thing to what you guys are doing, but its focus is specifically on women. It's a brilliant organisation, and she [Shonda Rhimes] was very complimentary, and really lovely.

But *Belle*'s story was quite different to *Bridgerton* - *Belle* was clearly isolated in her world, and it was a story of isolation that I wanted to tell.

How you find identity and self in a world where you are wealthy, and in a world that keeps you away from other people that look like you. How to find a sense of self without community, because we are not all lucky enough to grow up in one where our race is reflected. But *Belle* does find and embrace her identity – and that is her triumph. I'm doing something at the moment with Tiffany Haddish, which I'm loving, set in an earlier period, the 16th century, a Tudor world. In terms of the character whose story I'm telling, she's a real-life character, and her story has a number of Black people in it.

**Lenny:** When you make decisions about your projects, do you see these as bold moves in advancing diversity and representation? Because it takes a brave person to take on all these right-wing historians who have done such a good job of erasing Black people from the historical narrative. Where do you see your place in all of this?

**Amma:** Black people have lived and thrived and struggled in Britain for centuries. Read David Olusoga, read Peter Fry's *Staying Power*. Y'know Lenny, I have got to a place where I understand that unless I acknowledge certain of my achievements, even though I've had lots of awards, and some critical acclaim, as well as negative criticism too, then perhaps no one else will.

After *Belle*, the BBC could no longer make their quintessential period films and TV dramas and not include a Black person somewhere. It was embarrassing for them to think that they could do that, and ITV now has stuff in development all over the place. Period pieces now have Black people all over them. And everybody wants to do the movie, or the TV show, about Queen Victoria's adopted daughter, you know, from Nigeria. All these stories existed prior to *Belle*, but now they have a chance to be made.

**Lenny:** *Belle* opened the door for other projects to be considered.

**Amma:** Precisely, it opened the door, both in the US and in the UK. *Belle* did better in the US, actually. It helped change the conversation.

## The struggle for Black women's leadership to be accepted

**Lenny:** Talking about the US, people often talk about Black actors escaping to America to further their careers. I wanted to ask you about your experiences as a Black person behind the camera over there. Is it different for a person of colour working in the US versus working in the UK? And what lessons can each side of the Atlantic learn from the other? What's your experience?

**Amma:** I mean, I think in terms of the executives, the producers, I feel like I'm treated in the same way as the white guys are treated in the US to be really honest with you. But I think, in terms of crews in America and in the UK, they are very similar, and there is still a sense of, "Oh, my God, we've never quite been led by someone who looks like this before". So, I still think that there's a lot of work to be done, in terms of crews. The director has to know what they're doing, and the crew has to know that you know what you're doing - you have to really quickly show that you have a vision.

But if you're Black and you're female, you don't have the option of being able to go on set and try the camera here, or try the camera there. I'm not a director who can be thinking on my feet, I've got to have everything planned out. And I've got to know everything. And any thinking I'm doing has to be done so privately, and so quietly, between me and my DP, because, otherwise, it takes a long time to earn that trust, and you lose it very fast.

**Lenny:** Yeah, they smell blood. They smell blood in the water, and they'll bite your legs off.

**Amma:** Oh, my God. Yeah, absolutely. That is a reality. Whereas, with the sorts of producers and managers, there is an understanding of your vision, they picked you for you. They thought about it long and hard before they brought you on board, whereas crews don't necessarily know that, and

they've not necessarily watched a single one of my films.

**Lenny:** For the US, this is an interesting moment, isn't it? Because the streamers have taken prominence. Amazon's recent announcement that it's about to buy MGM studios is a massive play - a massive move on its part. I wanted to ask you about the differences between TV and film. Do you think the rise of the streamers, and their inevitable dominance, will affect diversity in terms of how programmes get funded and produced now? There just seems to be so many options for creative talent out there - many more interested buyers for a variety of not-so-mainstream products. Just look at *The Underground Railroad* [miniseries created and directed by Barry Jenkins]. This is an example of a very auteurist approach to longform broadcasting that would never have been produced if it had been pitched as a movie. Streamers don't just want a sure thing - they're investing across a spectrum of subject matter from dark to light. And they, at the moment anyway, seem very keen on investing in diverse talent. Is that the direction in which you're heading now? Will that be the next thing?

**Amma:** So, it was announced a few months ago that I'd be doing something similar - a very different kind of show, but sort of directing all eight episodes. And, you know, what was the first thing I did? I picked up the phone

and called Barry Jenkins [the Black director of *The Underground Railroad*] and said: "Barry, tell me what was great about the experience. Tell me what was horrendous about the experience, and tell me what you would do differently." And, I got massive goosebumps, because I realised 15 years ago [that] I couldn't do that. Who could I pick up the phone to? Who was the Black artist that I could pick up the phone to, and say, "what was your specific experience of doing this very specific thing?" And ask exactly what I should watch out for, and ask, "how can you help me navigate some of the potholes that you found?"

And he was so open and he was so brilliant.

## Don't just give us a chance, give us the chance to fail

**Lenny:** It is amazing that we all now have fellow Black peers, who we can call on for support and advice, but it is still tough. And for me, one of the things we are fighting for is the ability to fail, and to learn from our mistakes. You know, artists such as Steve Martin made a few clunkers before he found his feet in film and television, as did Robin Williams. Nobody ever said to Robin Williams, "Oh, you're only allowed one try and that's it. If it's a dog's breakfast, you don't get to make any more films."

**Amma:** I completely agree. As a Black person you go to creative prison if you ever make a bad movie. And I sort of noticed that. I was getting a lot of really terrible reviews for one of my movies, I think it only got like 42% on Rotten Tomatoes, when my average is about 80 or so. And, I sort of felt very isolated, and very alone, and I started looking at my white male peers, realising there have been loads of movies where they've got that 42%. But you know what reviewers do? They sort of ignore the bad movies [by White peers]. They move on. And those filmmakers are ... are making another movie within 18 or 24 months, and that becomes their next Oscar tipped movie.

**Lenny:** There's leeway for a certain kind of creative, that just isn't there for people of colour, or women, or non-binary people.

**Amma:** You learn from your mistakes, and you also learn by continually working. You know, the average for a woman between the first and the second film has been 10 years. It was very normal for a 10 year gap. And that's what it was for me - it was 10 years. But if you look at the amount of movies that my white male counterparts are making over those ten years - actually, even maybe a Black male director, in that time - what they're doing is they're honing their skills, they're getting better.

One of the reasons why I decided to do high production value television in the US, was that it meant that while I was getting my films financed, I was able to stay behind the camera and continue to work with great talent, continue to work with great DPs, and continue to hone my skills. Because, otherwise, when my movies come out nobody says; "Oh, she hasn't made a movie for five years or 10 years." They are comparing me to people who are making movies every 24 months or 48 months, and slating you if they feel that your movies don't come up to scratch.

## The need for ring-fenced funds for diversity

**Lenny:** I think one of the things that keeps creatives of colour, and producers and directors of colour, down is that we are so critically judged - and you only get one shot. And if you mess it up, that's it and it's gonna take you a long, long time to get back into anybody's good graces. It's one of the reasons why Marcus Ryder and I, in 2015, called for the UK broadcasters to ring-fence funds for diversity and, in 2019, to argue for tax breaks for diverse films. And we wondered - I wondered - if you had any views on either of these things?

**Amma:** I do, because, if you remember, Peter Edwards, who I mentioned earlier, who was Head of Drama at ITV Wales, how I met him was at

BAFTA, and I was introduced to him, and I thought, "Oh, God, I had better say something clever". And I thought, "What can I say?" And I said to him, "you know, Wales has some of the oldest black communities in Europe? What are you doing on ITV Wales to reflect that?" And he sort of looked at me, and said, "Yeah, I'll see you another time". And more or less walked off. And then, six weeks later, he rang me and said, "Are you the woman that I met at BAFTA?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I've been looking for you for six weeks, and want to have a conversation with you about the question you asked me, because I've been thinking about it." And when I went to meet him, we talked, and he said, "I'm going to ring-fence money for you. To tell the story you want to tell." And I said, "What story?" He said, "we can talk about that, but what I'm saying to you is, I'm going to ring-fence money for you. And what I'm saying to you is I'm guaranteeing to you that I will find something for you, and I will keep that money from my budget this year, to do it for you, because what you speak about is important."

And that's how *A Way of Life* came about. That's the movie that got me the BAFTA. That's the movie that essentially launched my career as a director, because he ring-fenced that money for me. We obviously got other money in the end, on top of it, but that first amount of money made a difference. So, whoever it is, that is ring-fencing money

specifically for Black talent, they are saying, I'm investing in the talent, not just the project.

**Lenny:** When Marcus Ryder and I were talking about ring-fencing money, in many ways, we saw this current correlation between the nations and the regions, and promoting under-represented groups and comparing them, saying; "You've given this money to nations - you should think in terms of communities too, and ring-fence money for them too. We're here, and we pay our licence fee." And our opinion was that those in charge were not looking at these under-represented groups in the same way. And, in the end, if you don't ring-fence money, those eyeballs will turn over and seek stories and imagery telling their stories via people like them.

**Amma:** Yes, they can now. They can go elsewhere, you know. 20 years ago, they couldn't, but now they can, as the streamers are looking to offer us what we want. If they're offering us the stories and the product that we want, that's where we will go, and the BBC will be left dead in the water if it doesn't catch up.



## We want a power share – not a power grab

**Lenny:** OK, here's my final question. If there was one thing you could get broadcasters, streamers and studios to do to increase diversity, what would that be?

**Amma:** I think it's more a psychological thing, more than anything. I want them to recognise that, in order to truly make a difference, they must understand that power has to be shared. I think the fear of sharing power means that there's a lot of lip service. And, they still struggle for the changes that are being made in order to be really meaningful, because people are still trying to hold on to power. And I think it's the recognition that power has to be shared. I don't want to sound like a greetings card, but I do believe that power is a bit like love and there's enough to go around. And just because you have a powerful Black commissioning editor whose choices are honoured, it doesn't mean you're less powerful. It just means that, rather than losing power, you are facilitating the unblocking of the arteries of our industry. And that means you have to really look in the mirror.

**Lenny:** Thank you Amma, this has been wonderful - it was a pleasure to speak to you.

My takeaway from this is your story about *A Way of Life* where the producer at ITV Wales, Peter Edwards, came to you and said, "We're going to ring-fence some money so that you can tell your story". That needs to happen on a global scale because if they don't do this simple thing - put money aside for marginalised groups for them to tell their own stories - nothing will change. Because nothing happens without investment.

## There should be room for everyone's story

**Amma:** The final thing I want to say is that, you know, I grew up with Scorsese and Spielberg, and mostly [it was] these American directors' work that inspired me beyond belief. And I got an Empire Award a few years ago. And, part of my speech was talking about all of these men - these white, very traditional men, whose work inspired me. But I also talked about the fact that so did Barbra Streisand - when Barbra Streisand did *Yentl*, I didn't realise how much her story behind that film and in front of the camera really inspired me. I know now, because I'm also obsessed with the film. But in my speech, I talked about how many more women I could have put on my list of directors who inspired me, if more women had been given the opportunities that those great men, whose work I love so much, had been given.

I don't want a world where there's no Scorsese, I don't want a world where there's no Spielberg, I believe that there was a *Belle* because there was a *Colour Purple* [directed by Steven Spielberg]. I believe that, because of him [Spielberg]

– being deemed to be a safe pair of hands - to walk audiences in the shoes of a Black woman, in *The Colour Purple*, white audiences realised that they'd actually be fine by the end of it. You know, if you walk two hours in the shoes of a Black woman - of Whoopi Goldberg – you'll be okay, just fine. You can actually come out quite elated and fulfilled by it, like a thousand other films, with the quintessential male protagonist at the centre.

**Lenny:** You're that person now?

**Amma:** Yes, exactly. And so what I want is for them [inspirational White directors] to exist, but I want to exist alongside them. And I want you, and everybody else, to be able to go to the cinema and go, "Oh, there's a number of films" – maybe one is by me and one is by a white male director. – "Oh, they're both about Black women, which one am I going to go and see?" and

go and see both. And that's fine. For me, that's absolutely fine. But don't tell my story, and not allow me to tell it too.

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Amma Asante is a BAFTA award-winning filmmaker, directing "*A Way of Life*" in 2004, "*Belle*" in 2013, "*A United Kingdom*" in 2016, and "*Where Hands Touch*" in 2018. This is a transcript of a conversation which took place over Zoom on 8th June 2021, produced and edited by Marcus Ryder.

### Representology takeaways

The intersection of race and gender presents particular challenges and difficulties as a filmmaker

- Women and people of colour are judged to higher standards compared to their white and male counterparts - their projects are less likely to be forgiven for 'failing'
- It is important that work which didn't make it to the screen is not considered a "waste of time" - it informs future, more successful work.
- Good mentors will ask questions - not offer up answers - allowing apprentices to develop their own solutions
- Money should be ring-fenced for work created by people from underrepresented groups

# THE VOICE

## FINDING MY VOICE

Working at The Voice, Britain's premier Black newspaper, gave journalist and broadcaster **Afua Hirsch** essential tools to navigate the media industry





**There are things I did at *The Voice* newspaper as a young journalist in the 1990s of which I'm not entirely proud. A photoshoot involving a snowboard, a cheesy interview about the festival Kwanzaa. My first ever copy was essentially some PR puff about a new single from American R&B artist Faith Evans.**

But then I went on to write about racism in football, anorexia in the Black community, the exclusion of pregnant schoolgirls, and the emerging culture of British hip hop. I was a Black teenage girl, writing about Black teenage girls. Before there was a language for 'For us, by us', *The Voice* was a crucial part of the media landscape in Britain that was doing just that.

Would mainstream media outlets have covered those stories at the time? If so, would they have centred on the Black experience or, instead, moulded it to fit a white gaze? Would their journalistic instincts, the clear call of public interest, have extended to include not just racism, systemic unfairness, but also - and these are perhaps the early works I'm most proud of - features about cultural innovation that are simply allowed to radiate Black joy?

I would later gain insight into the culture and content of those organisations when I became a correspondent for *The Guardian*, and freelanced for *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Sky News*, the BBC, CNN, Channel 4, the *Financial Times*, *Prospect*, *Marie Claire*, and many others. I could offer my anecdotal answer to these questions, and also cite the numerous studies conducted since the mid 1990s which reveal an abject failure by the news media to reflect the society it claims to report upon.

But the reality is that I may not have got there at all, were it not for my early experience of incubation at *The Voice*.

There is no way to describe the confidence that comes from feeling a sense of belonging and solidarity in a place of work. When I began writing for *The Voice*, the number of Black journalists working on national broadsheets and as TV broadcasters was negligible. Other than the grantees of Black British media - Trevor Phillips and Moira Stewart, and the crucial work of Darcus Howe - the idea of Black people reporting, investigating and presenting news and current affairs was a completely fantastical one to me. As is so often the case, the stories of important Black journalists who had been operating throughout the twentieth century - including Una Marson, Barbara Blake Hannah - were invisible and inaccessible to me.

And yet here was a newsroom that was fully staffed, owned and executed by Black professionals. From the editor to the secretary, the reporters and the photographers, it was an assembly of people who shared a sense of community, cultural heritage and discourse - an intellectual curiosity about the Black experience and about how to tell those stories.



It was only later, in newsrooms where I was the visible 'other' as one of few, or where there were no other Black journalists, that I came to appreciate how nurturing a space that was. Older, more experienced journalists took an interest in nurturing my enthusiasm for writing and reporting. It was not a perfect organisation - and had problems of leadership and financial management that, even from my inexperienced perspective, created challenges for the journalists that it hired. But the threat of feeling alienated or racially othered by microaggressions or bias - unconscious or overt - was a non-issue.

**Even at the time, many of the people who knew me when I worked at *The Voice*, questioned why we needed a Black newspaper at all. It was segregationist, they thought . . .**

The confidence that engendered - not just in me, but in many other young Black journalists I encountered who were beginning their careers there - stayed with me when I later entered the giants of the British media. It was a confidence I would need. These spaces make you highly conscious of your difference, and reward those who attempt to assimilate into the whiteness that characterised their culture. Ironically, for a profession that is supposedly interested in uncovering truths, there has been little introspection or honest analysis of either

this culture or how it impacts upon the people who must inhabit it.

Even at the time, many of the people who knew me when I worked at *The Voice*, questioned why we needed a Black newspaper at all. It was segregationist, they thought - it presumed a homogeneity in the Black community. There are both positive and negative elements to my response.

A negative is that, whilst the rest of the media has never overtly styled itself as 'the white media', that's exactly what it has been. From the tabloids peddling racist tropes about immigration and Black criminality, to the

broadsheets promoting fringe voices who appear to have internalised anti-Blackness, it's still often hard to avoid the sense that Britain's media organisations don't work for, or include, Black people.

Every Black journalist knows at least one person of colour in a predominantly white newsroom who has been able to get through, and enjoy success, as a result of assimilating into the pre-existing culture and narrative, and avoiding drawing attention to either their perspective, lived experience, or their identity as a Black person.

Recognition within the media is possible, but it comes at a cost.

A positive reason for celebrating a Black press - as well as all the other media outlets that speak specifically and directly to minority communities - is that it creates spaces in which we are not minorities.

This is something I have come to value more since my time at *The Voice*, more than two decades ago. As political and media narratives have become more polarised and polarising, my role has often been to serve as the token Black person in a discussion or debate, in which I'm required to justify both my legitimacy as a contributor, and the idea that racism exists.

Every Black commentator I know - regardless of their professional training or journalistic interest - receives dozens of requests to appear in still overwhelmingly white media spaces whenever a story about racism, or official attempts to deny its validity, becomes significant news. For many news organisations, this is the single role of Black journalists in debating questions about race or explaining what it means. When people ask me how I personally cope with the fatiguing nature of these requests, I often think back to my entry into journalism, at *The Voice*, and quietly offer my thanks for the resilience it gave me, and how long it continues to last.

**Afua Hirsch is a journalist, broadcaster, author, and Wallis Annenberg Chair of the University of Southern California**



# Putting the Black into Britain

**Professor Kurt Barling  
highlights the 'striking impact'  
of pioneering BBC current  
affairs series, *Black Britain*.**



Steve McQueen's 2020 *Small Axe* drama series on BBC Television and BBC2's *Black Power* documentary (March 2021) were rare forays into the mainstream experience of Black Britons. Sometimes, it feels that in every generation some commissioner or other suddenly 'discovers' there are real stories of Black contributions to this Island of Nations that we call home. It's hard to believe it is a quarter of a century since the BBC current affairs magazine series *Black Britain* (1996-2000) first graced our screens. It feels like yesterday, perhaps because I was a member of the production team that made it, and, uncomfortably, because it shows my generational point may be closer to reality than I would like to imagine. The root cause of this condition is amnesia: a collective forgetting of what has gone before and, as a consequence, the evaporation of important lessons that are starting points for remedial action, rather than regrets over what could have been. The editors of *Representology*, in supporting this piece of research, have recognised the importance of restoring institutional memory about what is possible, but also how reinventing the wheel to increase equality in the media should be totally unnecessary.

We already have credible answers.

Black current affairs programmes were rarely seen by programme commissioners as being successful. *Ebony*, *Bandung File*, *Black Bag* and *All Black* all followed *Black on Black*, which was broadcast on Channel 4 in the mid 1980s, to mixed reviews. BBC News and Current Affairs responded to the BBC Two Controller Michael Jackson's expression of interest in Black current affairs programming. A group was set up, which included Pat Younge, to understand those earlier offerings and what the BBC could do differently. The programme was able to build on the successful magazine format of *Here and Now*, and the resources of a well provisioned part of the BBC. Importantly, it found it had the autonomy to produce what the editorial team thought would work. The team had, and never relinquished, editorial power, and that was crucial.

The murder of the teenager, Stephen Lawrence, in 1993, opened fresh wounds concerning the treatment of Black people across Britain, and refocused broadcasters' attention on the reality that major journalism outlets, including the BBC, had failed to address the concerns of minority communities. Even whilst *Black Britain* was on air, an internal 1999 BBC memo from Tony Hall who, at that time, was Head of News and Current Affairs, recognised that: "The BBC receives more than £200m in licence fees from people from ethnic minority groups ... but they don't feel that the BBC connects with their lives" (Malik, 2001). *Black Britain* emerged as an attempt to

break the mould, in the midst of another periodic and recurring crisis of confidence - what is sometimes referred to as a 'watershed moment' - ruminating on where Britain was heading as a multi-ethnic community.

At the same time, journalism's foot soldiers, like the veteran foreign correspondent, George Alagiah (now a senior newsreader), described the BBC as being, "dominated by a white male culture. It has a certain way of working and networking" (Malik, 2001). That was also my own recollection of BBC News and Current Affairs, which I had worked in, by then, for several years. *Black Britain* was a genuine antidote to that. I joined the BBC in 1989, fresh from completing my Ph.D. at the London School of Economics. Shortly after entering the hallowed halls of broadcasting, I was accused by a manager of falsifying my CV. After a week in which I was left to stew, and during which I felt utterly demoralised, I was informed that it was all an elaborate joke to test whether I really was as bright and robust as my qualifications suggested. I never really trusted a BBC manager at face value again.

A lack of trust, too, lay at the heart of the poor relationship between Black communities and those who endeavoured to cover their stories. Professor Stuart Hall was a pioneer in the interrogation of this vexed relationship, as illustrated by his television essay, 'It ain't half racist, mum', a transcript of which was reprinted in the first issue of this journal (*Representology*, Winter



2020). Misrepresentation and stereotypes were at the root of Hall's analyses of the ways in which television presented minority communities (Hall, 1997). Malik has described this as a 'racialised regime of representation', one that is typically characterised by the singular association of inner-city riots with images of Blackness. It is not ironic that, by stumbling into the Broadwater Farm uprising in North London in 1985, I concluded that I needed to make journalism my vocation, so disgusted was I at the reporting of that community by the media. Tottenham became stigmatised for decades by that event, which had been sparked by the death of a Black woman, Cynthia Jarrett, as a result of police action.

An important remedy was always going to be (and remains to this day) the ability of broadcasters to broaden their recruitment base and to offer a wider variety of diverse perspectives - ones that would be reflected in the words and pictures that are chosen to describe the lives of Black people in Britain. This is where the recruits to *Black Britain* played such an important role. They came from a range of places, and they were not all of Black Caribbean or African heritage. Some were British Asian, and a number were white. Others, like myself, were of mixed ethnicity. Many journalists were in their late twenties to early thirties, and it was a truly ethnically mixed team, but one in which there was very quickly a strong sense of camaraderie and joint endeavour. This was symbolically cemented on Fridays by abstinence from BBC canteen food. A quick

trip to a Harlesden Caribbean takeaway brought about what was quickly dubbed 'Black Food Friday'. It was, and remains, rare to assemble such a concentration of Black talent in one place on national television.

Curiously, *Black Britain* was a programme on which many people who joined were warned by 'concerned' colleagues that it would be bad for their careers. So, we created our own production sub-culture of endurance and solidarity. It was just as well, given the ambiguity with which the programme was received. A review in the *Independent* on 6th July, 1996, three days before the first programme aired, read, "BBC tries to vault the ghetto walls with Black news". I guess they thought the headline was clever? At best, they were being insensitive to the aims of the series. It demonstrates the credibility challenge that was faced by the team. The series producer, Pat Younge, reminded viewers and critics who would listen that "it was a programme for Black people, and not about them" (*Black Film Bulletin*, 1997, p.8).

*Black Britain* had a striking impact on the way in which stories about Black people were told. For a start, it gave the lie to a sense that there was one 'Blackness', or to monocultural interpretations of what it was to be Black in Britain. One memorable editorial discussion very clearly illustrated this. The West Indies cricket team had played Kenya in the World Cup - and lost. This was little short of a disaster for Caribbean aficionados of the game. The item, shot at the Oval with some celebrated Caribbean elders, lamented the demise of West Indian

cricket to such depths that they couldn't even beat an African side. The 'Caribbeans' on the team all felt the collective sorrow of sporting decline. Then up popped the Oxford-educated Henry Bonsu, a man never afraid to inject criticism into a conversation, and asked why this piece of journalism had simply dwelt on decline, and had singularly failed to celebrate the rise of a new African cricketing nation, like Kenya. BBC journalism prided itself in challenging normative views, and Henry had allies in the *Black Britain* newsroom. Others, including me, have African heritage, and we agreed. It led to a

**Curiously, Black Britain was a programme where many people who joined were warned by 'concerned' colleagues that it would be bad for their career.**

lively debate about how, even on a programme like *Black Britain*, it was easy to fall into lazy assumptions and group-thinking about how a story should be told. This mistake was not made again.

We were able to put other important stories, like the trafficking of African historical artifacts to the art houses of the global north, on to the agenda. We gained exclusive access to Pentonville prison to witness the conversions to Islam of young African-Caribbean men. We even discovered new sporting talent: Lewis Hamilton was featured on the programme as a go-karting ace, long before he became the Formula One

World Motor Racing Champion. In fact, his backers offered *Black Britain* an exclusive opportunity to follow the story, but even we failed to spot this future legend.

Operation Black Vote (OBV) was launched in the run-up to the 1997 General Election. Its founder, Simon (now Lord) Woolley, credits the charity being featured in *Black Britain* with giving it credibility. One of the final programmes under the *Black Britain* brand was my obituary film for the, often controversial, Tottenham MP, Bernie Grant, who died in 2000. I find it significant that I have been asked every year by Black community groups how this film can be viewed, as it is unavailable from the BBC archive (See Dunkley-Gyimah, *Representology*, Winter 2020, for discussion on the importance of archives). Supply remains untailored to minority community demand.

Above all, the impact lay in the tone *Black Britain* set around stories. The team recognized that there was an imbalance in the news's knowledge of Black communities, and how that shaped news agendas, and that also often fed into bias or misperceptions when approaching stories about Black people. Typically, when Black people appeared on screen, it was in order to explain a problem. *Black Britain* attempted to apply the same criticality to those stories that were expected of us in the usual course of our journalistic duties. The current *Guardian* print editor, and former *Black Britain* reporter, Hugh Muir, describes this as telling the audience that "our issues are

your issues, because we are as British as you are" (Interview with author). For example, *Black Britain* wouldn't ignore stories of deaths in police custody, but the programme would foreground the human and family contexts of these stories, and show how structural problems impacted on individuals. Above all, the stories were not framed by debates on race, but were narratives about people.

To begin with, the magazine format followed the *Here and Now* series, presenting pieces to reflect the light and shade of current affairs stories. It tried to mix serious journalism with topical treatments, and pieces that primarily had an entertainment focus. It also delivered single item current affairs programming - from elderly returnees to Jamaica being fleeced of their savings, to Queen Victoria's love for a Black princess. The series lasted, in one iteration or another, until its demise in 2000. Having assembled such concentrated Black talent at the BBC, it was right that its people went off to pursue their careers elsewhere. It seems a pity that the programme itself had to end. The practical reality at the time was that there was probably an insufficient talent pipeline to sustain it, and failing to put one in place meant that the BBC missed the opportunity to make a sustained difference in this arena.

However, in other ways, *Black Britain* did create a pathway to sustainability through the talented folk who left the programme, but who moved on with greater confidence to 'infiltrate' other areas of journalism and the programme-making business. Of the 28 people involved in the production staff, nearly half went on to fairly illustrious careers (see Table 1). Others, who I haven't named, remain respected, successful and active in the business. Many recall *Black Britain* as a high point in their creative careers. Of course, this begs the question: how many more people could have benefited from this talent pipeline had the programme endured?

So why, you might ask, do we still have to discuss the lack of diversity in British journalism and programme-making? It's a question for which there is no easy answer. What is striking, however, is that *Black Britain* had autonomy within the organisational structure of the BBC, it had its guaranteed place in the schedule and, in this sense, it had the independence to wield an unusual level of power with which to deliver programming without interference. Since it broadcast, the cult of the commissioner has emerged - a particularly powerful set of gatekeepers to programmes, and to the type of talent that appears on those programmes. Ironically, in a digital ecosystem that has become less certain where the audience will go for what it wants, commissioners have become more insistent on what the audience doesn't want. The commissioners

**Table 1: Successful Black Britain Alumni**

Samina Baig	Playwright & Screenwriter
Kurt Barling	BBC London Special Correspondent
Henry Bonsu	BBC Presenter & Radio Executive
Brenda Emmanus OBE	BBC London Arts Correspondent
Gillian Joseph	Presenter Sky News
Michelle Matherson	Creative Diversity Partner, BBC Commissioning
Hugh Muir	Print Editor, The Guardian
Clive Myrie	BBC Correspondent. BBC News Presenter. Presenter Mastermind
Marcus Ryder MBE	Senior TV Executive and Diversity Champion
Fatima Salaria	Commissioner for BBC & Channel 4, MD Naked TV
Sandy Smith	Former Editor, BBC One Show
Maxine Watson	BBC Commissioner
Pat Young	BBC Commissioner. US TV Executive. ITV Studios Board

themselves lack diversity and this has worked against creating a diversity of stories and personnel.

In *Access All Areas* (Henry & Ryder, 2021), the question of ring-fenced financing has been floated as a remedy to this absence of access: to offer certainty to diverse production houses that they can make content which, because it is funded, will be broadcast. Good ideas cannot be refused once paid for. Of course, bad ideas can still be rebuffed and reworked, but good production houses know how to get the best from their product.

In one of her extraordinary BBC Reith Lectures, back in 2000, Onora O'Neill made an important intervention. It goes to the heart of the relationship between the media and the audience, and resonates well for Black and Brown audiences, in particular. O'Neill said, "To restore trust we need not only trustworthy persons

and institutions, but also assessable reasons for trusting and mistrusting" (O'Neill, 2000, BBC).

The brutal reality in today's media ecosystem is that the BBC is much diminished as a player in our broadcast environment. It no longer commands the attention or resource it once did, and it is even less relevant to younger audiences than it used to be, because of the alternatives that are now available. However, it remains at the heart of British cultural production, and still has the ability to set the mood music for the industry's approach to issues of equity. With *Black Britain*, there remain lessons of power, resourcing and recruitment which may not be applied in the same way now, but which offer us examples of what broadcasters must focus on in order to move the dial and tell a plurality of stories about our evolving nation.

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## Representology takeaways

**Established broadcasters can create news and current affairs output that connects with their non-white audiences**

- Broadcasters should address a lack of trust between managers and journalists of colour who fear being pigeon-holed working on stories about communities of colour.
- Black staff from a range of Black British communities will help to challenge the idea that there is a single homogenous Black community while recognising commonalities of experience.
- Talent pipelines can be created to ensure that these types of endeavours are sustainable and built upon.





# The Exclusion Act

## British East and South East Asians in British Cinema

**Chi Thai and Delphine Lievens**

**This research examines British films that were theatrically released from 1st January 2011 to 31st December 2020, and studies how many of these films featured British East and/or South East Asians (BESEA) in a directing, or lead acting role. The term BESEA refers to British people of the following descent and heritage: Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, China, East Timor, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, North Korea, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and their diasporas. This study shows a high level of absence of BESEA talent in the UK film industry. The data is drawn from Comscore.<sup>1</sup>**

## Executive Summary

**Our data is generated from a study of 1077 films that were theatrically released in the last decade.**

This research shows:

- In the past ten years, 9 British films have been released theatrically by BESEA directors, which equates to 0.8% of all releases.
- Of these 9 films, 1 film is a feature documentary.
- The majority of these films are defined as low budget.
- These 9 films account for 0.018% of box office for all British films released during the 10 year period.
- 2 films were released in over 25 screens at the widest point of release.
- The ethnic backgrounds of the directors were predominantly Japanese, Cambodian and Chinese.
- 3 films speak to the culturally specific lived BESEA experience.
- BESEA acting talent in a main role featured in only 17 theatrical releases in the 10 year period, which equates to 1.7% of all British film releases.
- BESEA actors typically are not cast in a leading role in these films.
- The ethnic backgrounds of the actors were predominantly Japanese and Chinese.

These findings suggest that the BESEA community is marginalized in the film industry, resulting in severe under representation both on and off-screen.

## Introduction

Ethnic minorities are often addressed under one banner, and are often referred to as “BAME”. A recent anti-racist movement<sup>2</sup> which is growing in momentum, aims to address systemic racism and to understand diversity by dismantling the term “BAME” and the limitations of what it represents.

Understanding diversity requires acknowledgement of all the marginalized communities of colour; and how these different communities are confronted by different challenges. Two recent reports have been illuminating in their examination of representation, ethnicity, and the British television industry.

- Dr. Jami Rogers’s Diversity in Broadcast Peak Scripted Television<sup>3</sup>, which exposed the deep exclusion of the BESEA community in the television industry. A significant observation in this study indicated 0% on-screen BESEA representation on major flagship continuing drama series for 2018.
- The Creative Diversity Network’s “Race and Ethnic Diversity: A Deep Dive into Diamond Data” studied the ethnic breakdown of senior production staff (e.g. commissioning editors, directors, producers, writers) and observed “East Asian” inclusion at 0.7%.

This report, “The Exclusion Act” has focused specifically on the BESEA community in the British film industry. In this regard, discussing the systemic racism faced by the BESEA community it is first worth reminding

ourselves of Orientalism (Said, 1978) and the exclusionary history that this community has faced, and to understand East and South East Asian (ESEA) specific systemic challenges, in which the BESEA group has been subjected to: the “Model Minority Myth”, “Yellow Peril” “Yellow Fever”; and lastly, in particular to the entertainment industry, the on-going practices of “Yellow Face” and “Whitewashing.” Within this historical context, this report demonstrates deep rooted exclusionary practices originating from colonial systems of power that continue to control who can and cannot shape the UK’s society and culture today.

## An Exclusionary History

Orientalism is the positioning of the West as the norm, sophisticated and superior in contrast to the exoticized, undeveloped and backwards East. Orientalism has driven the exclusionary history of the ESEA community. Two accounts of historical exclusion are worth flagging and although by no means comprehensive, they demonstrate the scope and extent of ESEA discrimination:

- The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the US, (prohibiting all immigration of Chinese labourers) which was not abolished until 1965.
- The forced repatriation from the UK of thousands of Chinese sailors in the 1940s.

Although these accounts refer to Chinese people, the exclusion extended to those that looked and sounded Chinese goes hand in hand with the common slight thrown at the ESEA

community “you all look alike.” It is this very sentiment that has informed the understanding of East and South East Asia and its diasporas as being made up of a singular monolithic group of people. This is reflected in all forms of bureaucracy, from film industry monitoring forms to the National Census, where BESEA people are given the choice of “Chinese” or “Other”, thus exposing a reductive white gaze (Consequently, it is difficult to accurately calculate the percentage of BESEA in the UK population - for the purposes of this report is approximated as 2.2%<sup>4</sup>. The

which are often dehumanizing: inscrutable or emotionless Asians, obedient lotus flowers, servile prostitutes, emasculated men, violent thugs, perpetual foreigners, and more.

This typecasting can become particularly insidious within the UK and US film industries where the stereotype is pervasive and damaging, particularly in the casting process as reported in Nancy Yuen's *Reel Inequality*:

“I work with a lot of different people, and Asians are a challenge to cast because most casting directors feel

experienced by ESEA women in western society. This form of racism perpetuates a type of misogyny that dehumanizes ESEA women, and in which violence<sup>6</sup> against them is normalized and socially acceptable. A study from the National Network to End Domestic Violence<sup>7</sup> reports: **“The everyday racism and sexism against Asian women yield deadly results, (with) 41 to 61 percent of Asian women report experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime. This is significantly higher than any other ethnic group.”**

An example of this is seen in the British writer-director Alex Garland's lauded directorial debut, *Ex Machina*<sup>8</sup> (2015) which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and for a BAFTA for Best Film. Kyoko, a secondary character played by British Japanese actor, Sonoyo Mizuno is an android who takes the form of a mute Japanese woman, obedient, emotionless and submissive, who serves her master and absorbs his mistreatment against her without complaint. When the film's protagonist, Caleb, meets Kyoko for the first time (because of the prevailing stereotype which is taken at face value as truth) he does not question whether or not Kyoko is human, until she later reveals she is an android.

Since the 1960s<sup>9</sup>, East and South East Asians in the West have been framed as a model minority. This is a myth that sets up an illusion that all Asian Americans and BESEA people are smart, wealthy, hard working, obedient and self-reliant. Most dangerously, the myth

pits marginalized communities against each other - “the good immigrant” versus the “bad immigrant,” whilst upholding white supremacy. The myth also perpetuates an erasure of BESEA racial identity and reality. Consequently, the BESEA community is one of the least visible minorities within the BAME spectrum. In the Race and Ethnic Diversity: Diamond Data Report 2020<sup>10</sup> BESEA inclusion in the television industry consistently ranked lowest in comparison with Black and South Asian groups.

Even more being the “good immigrant” has afforded the community no protection or privilege when confronted with COVID<sup>11</sup> - the community has gone from invisibility to hypervisibility during the pandemic, shattering the myth and showing it to be a thin mask of tolerance revealing the racism that lurks underneath.

Whitewashing is the casting of white actors in non-white roles. Yellow Face is the application of make-up to imitate the appearance of an East or South East Asian. Notable entries are *Fu Manchu*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Charlie Chan*. In the US, these practices were underpinned by legislation - the Motion Picture Production Code, widely known also as the Hays Code, was created in 1934 to prohibit “immoral” films, for instance, the depiction of miscegenation (e.g. interracial relationships). It would take until 1967 for anti-miscegenation to be deemed unconstitutional. The Hays Code<sup>12</sup> also informed that whitewashing and yellowface, where necessary, was a legal requirement. Although the Code is now obsolete the

## **Orientalism is a form of “Yellow Peril,” a persistent and harmful form of stereotyping and xenophobia that aims to ensure BESEA are perceived as threats and perpetual foreigners.**

combined Asian and BESEA community together make 7.5% of the UK population - the largest ethnic group after White British, followed by Black British at 3.3%. )

Orientalism is a form of “Yellow Peril,” a persistent and harmful form of stereotyping and xenophobia that aims to ensure that BESEA are perceived as threats and as perpetual foreigners. In entertainment, the majority of the representation of BESEA has been through the eyes of the status quo and consequently the portrayal of these characters are drawn by the hand of the establishment and seen through the prism of the Yellow Peril. This sustains common depictions

as though they're not very expressive,” one other casting director told Yuen. “They're very shut down in their emotions ... If it's a look thing for business where they come in they're at a computer or if they're like a scientist or something like that, they'll do that; but if it's something where they really have to act and get some kind of performance out of, it's a challenge.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the sexual fetishizing of ESEA women, which is also known as “Yellow Fever,” not only prevails on our cinema and television screens, but also in everyday life, and represents a major contributory factor to the violence and abuse

practices of yellow face and whitewashing are not, and recent examples include:

- Jim Sturgess, Hugo Weaving, Halle Berry, Hugh Grant and James D'Arcy as Neo-Koreans in *Cloud Atlas* (2012).
- Emma Stone as Hawaiian Asian Allison Ng in *Aloha* (2015).
- Tilda Swinton as the Tibetan *Ancient One* in *Doctor Strange* (2016).
- Natt Wolf as Light Turner in *Death Note* (2017).
- Scarlett Johansson as Japanese cyborg *Motoko Kusanagi* in *Ghost in Shell* (2017).
- French Algerian Tahar Rahim was cast in the titular role of a Vietnamese Indian in *The Serpent* (2021) a prime time BBC drama.

The practice of Yellow Face and Whitewashing takes away precious opportunities from an already marginalized community that has so few opportunities in the first place and contributes to the under-nourishment of the BESEA talent pool. In this world, more white women have won an Academy Award for playing an East or South East Asian than actual East or South East Asian actresses themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Yellow Face and Whitewashing perpetuate the principle that white actors can play anybody and everybody. Whereas people of colour, cannot be white neither can they be themselves. From a wider societal perspective, it sets white as the norm and the default, the standard that non-white people should aspire to but which ultimately, they can never achieve.

being British East Asian suddenly seems to diminish your “authenticity” to be “Chinese”. Under this bias, some casting directors would prefer to cast someone from China/East Asia for a Chinese/East Asian role in a western production, a practice that is not much carried out for roles of other ethnic origins. An example is the Disney remake of *Mulan* casting Chinese actress Liu Yifei. It denies the opportunity for East Asian diasporas in the West to create their own representation in the media that they themselves consume.’ (Jennifer Mak, 2019<sup>14</sup>).

The BESEA community is confronted with systems of exclusion which have long histories and remain real obstacles to the community today. But there is another devastating wound to inflict, in the wake of these external social and structural forces, the BESEA community must also contend with internalized racism, which can embed complex and deep-rooted feelings of doubt, disrespect and hatred for one’s heritage.

## Methodology

This report examined all of the British feature films that were released in the UK between 1st January, 2011, to 31, December, 2020<sup>15</sup>. Films were defined as British if they indicated that that the UK was the primary territory of origin<sup>16</sup>. All non British films were excluded from this study. Data was compiled from Comscore and tabulated to indicate data across the following headings:

- Director/s
- Number of screens the film exhibited across at the point of widest release

- Cumulative UK box office gross
- Main Cast
- Genre
- Release Date

To investigate and confirm the ethnic heritage of directors and actors, names were cross checked against industry databases including IMDB or directly with directors, actors or their agents / representatives. The analysis was also underpinned by the professional knowledge of the authors of this report - in that regard there are limitations to the precision that is ascertainable (especially in the event of people of colour who pass<sup>17</sup> for white). Given that white is considered to be the default it is often not written explicitly, whereas it often is for people of colour. In addition, sometimes a person’s ethnicity was reported under a more generic term, as opposed to being reported more specifically.

Further research was undertaken to also calculate and source:

- Screen averages<sup>18</sup>
- Production budgets
- BFI production funding awards

Budgets were confirmed by producers or funders in order to ensure reliable data. Where this was not possible, estimates were provided by experienced line producers. The data was analyzed comparatively across industry averages to illuminate patterns and trends.

The study also interviewed Robert Mitchell<sup>19</sup>, a leading Theatrical Insight analyst in the UK.

## The BESEA community is confronted with systems of exclusion which have long histories and remain real obstacles to the community today.

With limited opportunities for BESEA acting talent to develop their employability (experience, skills and profile), further forces come into play that can potentially further marginalize a vulnerable community. An example of this is how diasporic ESEA might be considered less authentic than “motherland” ESEA: ‘There is a huge racial authenticity bias that happens to all British East Asian actors I think in that



## BESEA Off-Screen Representation

Of the 1077 British films that were theatrically released in the UK in the last decade, 9 were helmed by BESEA directors. Of the 9 films, 8 are narrative features: *Black Pond* (2011), *Lilting* (2014), *The Darkest Universe* (2016), *Gangsters Gamblers Geezers* (2016), *The Receptionist* (2018), *Redcon-1* (2018), *London Unplugged* (2019) and *Monsoon* (2020).

*Dispossession: The Great Social Housing Swindle* (2017) is a feature documentary and is the only theatrically released feature documentary with a BESEA director at the helm in the last 10 years, from a total of 249 British documentaries that were released in that period.

**Table showing all BESEA directed films  
December 2020 -January 2021**

Film	Year	Director	Gender	Heritage	Screens	Screen average (£)	Budget (£)	Gross (£)	BFI Funding <sup>20</sup>
Black Pond	2011	Will Sharpe	Male	Mixed: British & Japanese	3	5626	25,000	16,879	No
Lilting	2014	Hong Khaou	Male	Cambodian	28	4738	120,000	13,267	Yes
The Darkest Universe	2016	Will Sharpe	Male	Mixed: British & Japanese	4	571	46,000	2282	No
Gangsters Gamblers & Geezers	2016	Peter Peralta	Male	Filipino	1	2053	100,000	2053	No
Dispossession The Great Social Housing Swindle	2017	Paul Sng	Male	Mixed: British & Chinese	8	5702	60,000	45,613	No
The Receptionist	2018	Jenny Lu	Female	Chinese	25	462	300,000	11,553	No
Redcon-1	2018	Chee Keong Cheung	Male	Chinese	19	1012	800,000	19,232	No
London Unplugged	2019	Kaki Wong & Qi Zhang	Female	Hong Kong & Chinese	3	2789	140,000	8366	No
Monsoon	2020	Hong Khaou	Male	Cambodian	13	1771	1,725,000	23,021	Yes

# General Observations

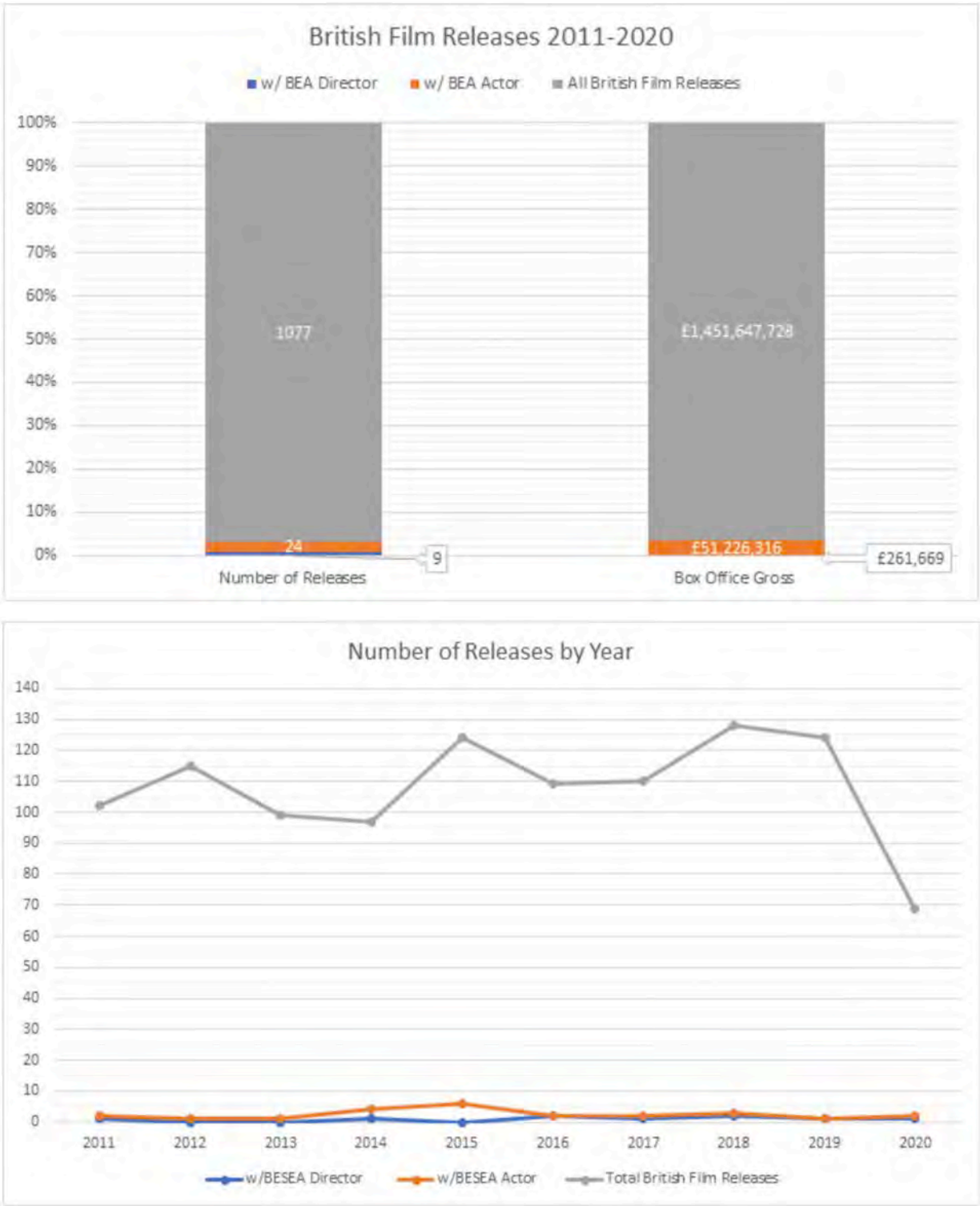
These 9 films equate to 0.8% of all theatrical releases in the UK.

4 of the 9 films are directed by the same directors, Will Sharpe and Hong Khaou.

Of the 9 films, 3 have directors who identify as female: Jenny Lu (*The Receptionist*) and Kaki Wong and Qi Zhang (directors on the *London Unplugged* anthology).

The ethnic backgrounds of the directors are: Chinese, Hong Kong, Filipino, Cambodian, mixed White British and Japanese; and mixed White British and Chinese. There are no directors of the following descents and heritages: Brunei, Burma, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, North Korea, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and their diasporas.

The graphs shown below highlight the availability of options for BESEA talent (both in terms of volume of releases and box office grosses) in the past 10 years, in comparison to all of the British films released.



## Budgets, Distribution and Box Office Revenue

The average number of cinemas in which UK films are released is 103. This reduces to 23 cinemas when considering films that grossed under £150k, as per the 9 films listed above. The screen average for all of the 1077 British films analysed sits at a median of £1,842, an amount which 6 of the films listed above exceeded. Despite the restrictions of the films' release size, some of these films have overperformed at the box office in terms of their screen average - these are *Black Pond*, *Lilting*, *Dispossession*, and *London Unplugged*.

The median production budget for UK domestic films has risen in the past 10 years<sup>21</sup>, starting at £180k in 2011 and gradually rising to reach £750k in 2019. 6% of the British films made in 2019 had a budget that was in excess of £5m, and a further 45% had a budget of between £500k and £5m. The remaining 48% had budgets that were lower than £500k. Even with the small sample size, it is clear that BESEA directed films occupy the lowest end of the budget scale in the film market, with 7 of the 9 films having a budget that was considerably less than £500k.

Of the 9 films, 2 films received BFI funding - *Lilting* and *Monsoon* - both directed by Hong Khaou. Of the full list of 1,077 British films, 137 received BFI production funding, equivalent to 13%.

The data suggests that BESEA directed films receive smaller releases. Of the 9 films released by BESEA directors, only 2 were released in over 25 screens: *Lilting* and *The Receptionist*. *Lilting* is also the only film that grossed over £100k at the box office, with a lifetime total of £133k. These 9 films account for just £262k of the UK box office gross, or 0.018% of box office for all of the films released in the UK during the 10 year period.

The most significant finding from this data set is that with the exception of two films all BESEA directed films are low budget ones<sup>22</sup>. Low budget films are under-resourced in so many ways - from a comprehensive development process, funding, cast, crew, production value and more. It is accepted that low budget films will struggle in the marketplace, often attracting a lower P&A spend. Robert Mitchell confirmed this, asserting that for low budget films:

**"There is a clear correlation between production budget and P&A budget, this is unsurprising given the financials at stake and the importance therefore of reaching the biggest audience available. A low budget film will not need as large an audience to make it profitable, although it will likely have to work harder to reach them."**

Often low budget films serve as debut films and as stepping stones to higher budgets and bigger production ambitions. When questioned as to why there are so many low budget films in the marketplace, Robert Mitchell replies that: **"Low budget films reduce barriers to entry for unproven filmmakers. They can be both a proving ground for ambitious filmmakers and a safe-zone for filmmakers with stories to tell that may not be deemed particularly commercial."**

The highest budget is *Monsoon* at £1.7m. There is not a wide mix of films - low, medium and high, or a mix of directing talent that goes from the very experienced to the emerging directors, and so forth. This is an unhealthy snapshot of an industry. A healthy market will house a variety of budgets, genres, experience and talent. Robert Mitchell emphasized the importance of this, acknowledging that: **"No two people like all the same things and catering only for one group only ensures disaster, because the moment that group doesn't come out the industry is lost."**

Only 3 of these BESEA directors have gone on to make another feature at the time of writing. This data shows that BESEA directors work with the lower end of production budgets and receive lower distribution support. The combination of the elements creates difficult conditions for BESEA directors to thrive in and sustain careers. Robert Mitchell explained:

**"A low budget feature can be seen as a calling card, a proof of talent. Getting to**

**make a second film if your first film is both unprofitable and unloved is very difficult."**

As these films are perceived to underperform at the box office, film financiers and distributors will naturally perceive BESEA directed films to be risky, niche and uncommercial. This contributes to an ecosystem in which BESEA helmed films are not supported by the industry, maintaining BESEA at the margins of an industry. This was further clarified by Robert Mitchell:

**"There can be a justifiable perception that any culturally-specific features are 'risky' because they rely on a specific niche audience to come out. Bigger distributors will tend to have a more 'one size fits all' approach to marketing, and distribution which may lack the nuance necessary to properly exploit genuine opportunities among minority groups. There is a bias among largely white, heterosexual 'gatekeepers' that stories from minority filmmakers are less likely to break out and be seen as universal."**

Of the 9 films from the last decade, 3 of these films, *Lilting*, *Monsoon* and *The Receptionist* can be broadly themed as being culturally specific to the 'lived' BESEA experience. Simply, BESEA audiences are starved of films that reflect them and their experiences. With so few BESEA directors able to get their films made and widely seen, the greater diaspora do not see themselves being reflected in the cinema.

## BESEA On-screen Representation

Out of 1077 films BESEA actors<sup>23</sup> feature in 17 theatrical releases over this 10-year period. This equates to 1.7% of all British film releases. These are: *Black Pond*, *Johnny English Reborn*, *Submarine*, *All Stars*, *Lilting*, *Before I Go To Sleep*, *The Double*, *Honey Trap*, *X+Y*, *The Darkest Universe*, *Gangsters*, *Gamblers and Geezers*, *Stratton*, *The Receptionist*, *Anna & the Apocalypse*, *Mary Queen of Scots*, *Monsoon*, *The Personal History of David Copperfield*.

6<sup>24</sup> of those films are helmed by BESEA directors that feature the previous section - they are: *Black Pond*, *Lilting*, *The Darkest Universe*, *Gangsters*, *Gamblers and Geezers*, *Monsoon* and *The Receptionist*.

### Budgets

Films featuring BESEA actors in their cast demonstrate a wider variety of production budgets. At the lower end *Black Pond* (£25k), middle range *Before I Go To Sleep* (£3.3m) and upper *Johnny English Reborn* (£32m).

### Box Office

Films featuring BESEA actors in their cast demonstrate a wider variety of box office returns, from *Johnny English Reborn* (£20.7m) and *Mary Queen of Scots* (£9.3m) to *Anna & The Apocalypse* (£32k) and *Stratton* (£28k). At the lower end *Gangsters*, *Gamblers and Geezers* (£2k) and *The Darkest Universe* (£2k).

### Release size

In addition, the films cover a better scope of release sizes too, including a number of saturation releases such as *The Personal History of David Copperfield* at 680 screens and *All Stars* at 441 screens. At the lower end *Black Pond* at 3 screens and in the middle, *The Double* with 79 screens.

### ESEA Heritage

The ESEA heritage of actors in these films are predominantly Chinese and Japanese with the vast majority of the remaining backgrounds excluded.

### Tokenism

Gemma Chan stars in 4 of the 17 films. Mak observes:

“When East Asians finally “make it” to the top, such as Gemma Chan landing a lead role in *Humans* or Katie Leung starring as a romantic interest to Harry Potter, the industry becomes complacent with casting these big names who they have helped create. Essentially, traditional mainstream companies engage in an exercise of patting themselves on the back for apparent “diversity”, yet refusing to cultivate new talents from the East Asian community.” (Mak 2019).

Power-holders, intentionally or unconsciously select one, or a few marginalized talents to succeed which gives an impression of broader inclusion. The dangers of tokenism are well documented - it is a form of performative inclusion that often comes at the expense of a wider community. If tokenism is the problem, then pluralism is the solution.

**The dangers of tokenism are well documented - it is a form of performative inclusion that often comes at the expense of a wider community.**



Table showing all BESEA starring films  
January 2011-January 2021

Film	Year	BESEA Cast	Heritage	Screens	Screen Average	Budget (£)	Gross (£)	BFI Funding <sup>25</sup>
Black Pond	2011	Will Sharpe	Japanese	3	5626	25,000	16,879	No
Johnny English Reborn	2011	Togo Igawa	Japanese	552	37,471	32,300,000	20,683,873	No
Submarine	2011	Gemma Chan	Chinese	107	13,973	1,200,000	1,495,123	Yes
All Stars	2013	Hanae Atkins, Kieran Lai	British Japanese & Chinese	414	6050	2,500,000	2,504,699	No
Lilting	2014	Andrew Leung, Leila Wong	British/Chinese Chinese/Japanese	28	4738	120,000	13,2670	Yes
Before I Go To Sleep	2014	Jing Lusi	Chinese	375	8909	15,800,000	3,340,874	No
The Double	2014	Gemma Chan	Chinese	79	9949	6,300,000	785,985	Yes
Honeytrap <sup>26</sup>	2015	Jessica Sula	Mixed Black, Hispanic Chinese	7	571	600,000	3616	Yes
X+Y <sup>27</sup>	2015	Jo Yang	Chinese	117	3771	2,600,000	441,198	Yes
The Darkest Universe	2016	Will Sharpe	Japanese	4	571	46000	2282	No
Gangsters Gamblers & Geezers	2016	Peter Peralta	Filipino	1	2053	100,000	2053	No
Stratton	2017	Gemma Chan	Chinese	144	378	12,900,000	54,377	No
The Receptionist	2018	Teresa Daley	Taiwanese	25	462	300,000	11,553	No
Anna & the Apocalypse	2018	Marli Siu	Mixed: Chinese & British	36	1559	1,500,000	56,120	No
Mary Queen of Scots	2019	Gemma Chan	Chinese	553	16,813	18,000,000	9,297,517	No
Monsoon	2020	Henry Golding	Malaysian/British	13	1771	1,725,000	23,021	Yes
The Personal History of David Copperfield	2020	Benedict Wong	Chinese	680	9426	11,200,000	6,409,562	No

# On-screen Representation in Television versus Cinema

These findings mirror observations found in Dr. Jami Rogers Equity report: *Diversity in Broadcast Peak Scripted Television*<sup>28</sup> which examined primetime television broadcast by the BBC One, BBC Two, ITV and Channel 4 in 2018. In this study on-screen representation, the data was broken down by ethnicity and showed:

- 82% White
- 9% African-Caribbean
- 7% South Asian
- 1% East/South East Asian
- 1% Middle Eastern

The report concluded that BESEA people are severely under-represented. What was telling, is that in entire year on the major flagship continuing drama series there was zero on-screen BESEA representation.

See **Table one**

Both television broadcasters and film industry executives are failing in relation to inclusion where it comes to the BESEA community. The severe lack of inclusion requires urgent attention.

## Leading Roles

The Comscore data was then further examined to see whether the BESEA cast featured were in leading or secondary roles.

See **Table two**

Table one

	White	African - Caribbean	South Asian	BESEA	Middle Eastern
Casualty	71%	21%	7%	0%	1%
Holby City	74%	20%	6%	0%	0%
Hollyoaks	81%	10%	9%	0%	0%
Eastenders	84%	8%	5%	0%	3%
Coronation Street	87%	4%	8%	0%	1%
Emmerdale	94%	3%	3%	0%	0%

Taken from Dr. Jami Rogers Equity report: *Diversity in Broadcast Peak Scripted Television*

Table two

Lead	Secondary
Honeytrap Jessica Sula	Black Pond Will Sharpe
X+Y Jo Yang	Johnny English Reborn Togo Igawa
The Darkest Universe Will Sharpe	Submarine Gemma Chan
Gangsters, Gamblers & Geezers Peter Peralta	Lilting Andrew Leung
Monsoon Henry Golding	The Double Gemma Chan
	Before I Go To Sleep Jing Lusi
	Stratton Gemma Chan
	Anna & The Apocalypse Marli Siu
	Mary Queen of Scots Gemma Chan

Table Three

Film	Year	BESEA Director	BESEA Cast	If yes, what type of role
Black Pond	2011	Will Sharpe	Yes	Secondary
Lilting	2014	Hong Khaou	Yes	Secondary
The Darkest Universe	2016	Will Sharpe	Yes	Lead
Gangsters Gamblers & Geezers	2016	Peter Peralta	Yes	Lead
The Receptionist	2018	Jenny Lu	Yes	Secondary
Monsoon	2020	Hong Khaou	Yes	Lead

Looking at the data in this regard exposes that of the 17 films listed, 5 featured a BESEA in a leading role. These leading roles account for 29% of all the films with BESEA cast, and 0.5% of all the British films examined. Typically, BESEA actors are playing secondary or smaller roles in British films. In the US, Annenberg<sup>29</sup> study data shows that 1% of lead roles go to Asian Americans. These findings confirm a reported experience of ESEA actors as typically not being perceived as leading acting material. Such is the prevalence and frustration of this view, that screenwriter and author, Charles Yu, predicated an entire novel, *Interior Chinatown*<sup>30</sup> in order to satirize that falsehood, but also to expose the dangers of that perception:

“Yu explores in devastating (and darkly hilarious) fashion Hollywood’s penchant for promoting clichés about Asians and Asian-Americans. Wu has worked his way from “Background Oriental Male” to “Dead Asian Man” to “Generic Asian Man Number Three/Delivery Guy” — a long way from “Kung Fu Guy,” which is where he wants to be.”

## The Relationship Between Off-Screen and On-Screen Representation

The 8 narrative films directed by BESEA were also examined for BESEA on-screen representation.

See **Table three**

Of the 8<sup>31</sup> narrative films helmed by BESEA directors, 6<sup>32</sup> featured BESEA cast.

This suggests a relationship and an interconnectedness between off-screen and on-screen representation - films created by BESEA writers and directors are more likely to also feature BESEA actors.

## Conclusion

The film industry is part of an entrenched and long-standing colonial system which has put into play a complex set of robust, and often insidious forces that are intent on the continued marginalization of the BESEA community. This system houses near impossible conditions for BESEA directors and actors to thrive and sustain careers.

With BESEA helmed films typically occupying the lower end of the budget scale, and also receiving less distribution support, these films are perceived to underperform at the box office - informing and sustaining the viewpoint that BESEA directed films are risky and not commercial. This contributes to an ecosystem in which BESEA helmed films are rarely supported by the industry, thus relegating BESEA filmmakers to the margins of an industry.

Films featuring BESEA characters are more likely to be helmed by a BESEA director. To stimulate opportunities for BESEA actors, and to increase visible representation of BESEA faces, voices and stories on our screens, the industry should look at who it is they are supporting behind the camera - or more simply, at understanding the nuance that it is who you fund not what you fund, that will make the biggest positive impact.

The exclusion has a knock-on effect for audiences:- with so few BESEA directors being able to get their films made and widely seen, the BESEA community do not see themselves reflected in the cinema, especially in films that authentically represent their lived experiences. This creates narrative poverty for the BESEA community, thus reinforcing their marginalization. But it also has deep implications for the wider society, who are mainly exposed to harmful stereotypes and are not afforded normalized and authentic depictions of the BESEA community. The very real fall out from this has already been witnessed through the rapid and sharp rise of COVID fuelled Asian hate in the UK and in the United States, which has resulted in real lives being lost.

## Recommendations

Power-holders need to start fully understanding diversity and that begins with acknowledging how different communities are marginalized differently. For the BESEA community, there has been a long history of exclusion which has given rise to varied forms of systemic racism, much of which has evolved to remain invisible to the untrained eye. Recognition of BESEA experience is the first step.

Next, to increase representation, power-holders need to understand how on-screen representation is related to representation off-screen. That to generate more and better visible representation on-screen they should invest in more representation off-screen.

This point is particularly important, given that in a colonially rooted system, the risk is of the status quo co-opting the cultures and narratives of marginalized communities. This will give the appearance of an inclusive society, but, in actuality the practice of co-option is another form of oppression. Supporting marginalized communities in telling their own stories is key to genuine allyship, as opposed to performative allyship.

The powers that be also need to move beyond tokenistic gestures and to engage with actions that propagate pluralism - it is through this that we can transition from narrative poverty to plentitude.

In film distribution, there is an urgent need to normalise and reframe the perception of BESEA talent and their stories as not being ‘risky’. This relies on challenging the long-entrenched traditions of the UK distribution industry, and the gatekeepers that uphold them. Throughout the British film industry, a largely homogenous workforce<sup>33</sup> is preventing diverse talent from prospering.

This study was only able to examine British films that were theatrically released, who they were helmed by, and the main cast featured in them. The final recommendation is that further research is done to:

- Examine how BESEA producers and writers are working in the industry.
- Discover which films are being supported at the development stage.
- Ascertain which films are being supported at the production stage.
- What the ethnic breakdown of students attending film schools is.



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### Representology takeaways

#### The representation of British East and South East Asians in film is shockingly low

- Visibility on-screen is directly related to staffing off-screen and improving the diversity of the latter needs to be where the industry starts.
- Question why some projects are deemed to be 'risky', compared with others – where's the evidence to back it up?
- Genuine allyship lies in supporting people to tell their own stories, rather than appropriating their experiences.

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# N

Nina Robinson was part of the launch team for BBC 1Xtra in 2002. Her face is circled among a distinguished crowd of producers, DJs and music executives. Many, like her, are people of colour, though not the person standing front-and-centre, Andy Parfitt, Controller of Radio 1 (and later 1Xtra) from 1998-2011.

**Nina Robinson**

**The term 'urban' caused myriad problems for Black artists working in the music industry argues Nina Robinson, who helped launch BBC 1Xtra.**

**Rounding up very distinct music genres, such as Hip-Hop, Soul and R&B, whose only seeming connection is that they are largely performed by Black artists and putting them all into a box labelled ‘urban’, is no longer acceptable practise in the UK music industry.**

In a new pledge to stamp out racism, it’s listed at the top of the Ten Point Action Plan from UK Music – an umbrella organisation representing the UK music industry, which states that the:

**“Urban classification [should be] replaced in all reports and communications - either by genre, such as Soul or Rap; UK Music members will commit to support those who wish to use the term ‘black music’”.**

How did a word come to be so associated with racial discrimination and injustice? The use of ‘urban’ by the music industry, was seen as an act of ‘silo-ing’ Black artists, lumping them into one homogenous group and tarring a wide expanse of Black talent with a very broad and biased brush. Some music industry executives used the categorisation to marginalise Black artists, justifying the signing of white artists and not of Black artists. The X-Factor winner, Alexandra Burke, said in an Instagram video, that she had been told by a record producer; “I already have one Black artist, I don’t need another”<sup>1</sup>.

Conversely, the categorisation keeps Black artists in one box, limiting their success and exposure to different audiences. The huge hit song by Lil Nas X ‘*Old Town Road*’, was easily slotted into the Hip-Hop/Rap category, but was removed by Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart for not ‘embracing enough elements of country music’.

The term ‘urban’ sits uncomfortably for many. After his win in the ‘urban’ music category at the 2020 Grammy’s, the artist, Tyler, The Creator, said:

“I don’t like that word, it’s like a politically correct way of saying the N-word to me”.

### **Will Dropping ‘Urban’ and Reclaiming ‘Black Music’ Really Change Systemic Racist Issues or Solve Underlying Diversity and Inclusion Problems that are Inherent to the British Music Industry?**

For me, as a member of the launch team for BBC Radio 1Xtra, which, in 2002, burst onto the music landscape under the banner ‘The Home of New Black Music’, the change from ‘Black’ to ‘urban’ means a lot. 1Xtra’s original tagline proudly represented Black culture with a diverse set of DJs; from the Rampage Duo, known for their legendary sound system at Notting Hill Carnival, to Robbo Ranx, with his expansive network of contacts in Jamaican dancehall, to DJ Flight, who quietly took her place behind the decks via pirate radio for appreciative Drum ‘n’ Bass fans. When the marketing of the station changed, and ‘Black’ was dropped and replaced, not only with ‘urban’, but also with ‘street’ music monikers, it was a signifier of change. Arguably, the loss of the ‘Black music’ identifier was whitewashing a rich history, severing Black musical roots and leaving open the door to cultural appropriation.

For decades, the term ‘urban’ has been used as a classification by record companies, which is thought to date back to 1974, when it was used by a radio station in New York. It was dreamt up by (white) marketing strategists who were packaging Black music whilst minimising attention to the Black artist; offering an acceptable face to the white mainstream, to attract more listeners and advertising dollars. The term’s history is

also linked to the US federal clean-up programmes of the 1950s and ‘60s that targeted slums and Black people living in poverty. Urban was negatively connected to being poor and Black. It’s worth noting that, before ‘urban’, the term ‘race records’ was used. ‘Urban’ was deemed to be less offensive by white music executives, even though ‘race records’ had helped generate income for a Black music industry and implicitly acknowledged its debt to Black people. The ‘urban’ classification hid the racial element, and would also ghetto-ise Black artists. Some of the Black artists who were marketed in this way went on to forge highly successful careers, and were loved by audiences globally. These included Stevie Wonder, Barry White and The Stylistics.

Debate on the use of the term ‘urban’ by the music industry had been ongoing for decades<sup>2</sup>, but pressure to finally drop it, gathered pace amid the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, when Ariana Grande and Drake’s label, Republic Records, announced that they would be erasing it “**from their verbiage in describing departments, employee titles and music genres**”<sup>3</sup>.

For many in the British music industry, the word ‘urban’ will not be missed. Vin Gader, a music producer and promoter, thinks it was always pretty meaningless.

“To me, it is what music they make, the genre of music they make. Is it Soul? Is it R&B? Is it Jazz? Rather than calling it ‘urban’. What is urban?”

Yaw Owuso, a music entrepreneur who has managed artists as exec. at the Playmaker Group, which



is based in Liverpool, agrees. He sees some benefit in using the term from a marketing perspective, because he thinks it helps 'broaden things' and removes the political element from the music, since he sees how the term 'black -- as a small b or capital B is very political'. The removal of these associations from music and artist, he thinks, may help to sell more records. This is far from proven to be the case. Jay Davidson, launch and brand manager at 1Xtra for 4 years from 2002 says she was disappointed when 'Black music' was dropped from all branding. But she was not surprised. "Black music" was seen as a barrier in trying to grow the station to a majority white audience". She thinks that audience research may have indicated that white listeners would feel "alienated" and that 1Xtra did "not reflect them". Station management, she feels, could not afford for potential listeners to "feel excluded". Ultimately, Yaw finds 'urban' to be problematic.

**"I see it as a catch-all term that allows white artists to do what is classed as Black music, it felt like it was to champion them. So, I think the change is good to show there is a wind of change. I don't think anyone will be fighting to keep it".**

When BBC 1Xtra lost its 'Black music' tagline, there was a shift felt by some people working at the station. Whilst it is not possible to distinguish correlation and causality, a change in the proportion of Black and ethnic minority staff working on and off-air has been noted by some. In their award-winning Black Lives Matter inspired show, 1Xtra Talks, long-time 1Xtra

DJs, Ace and Seani B, bared their souls, as Black men, they spoke of the institutional racism that they had encountered in their lives, including inside the workplace.

Seani B, who has been a DJ at the station for 18 years, noted that if 'we looked different', then his career would have moved further along, since he had been denied his chance to have a 'good crack' at the work he had dedicated his life to. He knows this was due to the perception that, as a Black man, he was less 'palatable' than white DJs. Just as 'urban' was supposed to make Black music acceptable to (white) audiences, maybe a white DJ could package Black music with a wider appeal to British listeners.

That the radio industry has a serious diversity and inclusion problem is not really in any doubt.

According to Ofcom's 2019 diversity report, in BBC Radio as a whole, only 9% of staff are from a black and ethnic minority, which drops to 6% at senior leadership levels. Commercial radio is even worse, with only 6% of all staff at Bauer Media, which includes Kiss FM, and no senior leaders.

Speaking to one long time senior 1Xtra employee, who wishes to remain anonymous, the lack of diversity in youth music radio at the BBC is plain to see. As they sit and speak via Zoom on the 8th floor of New Broadcasting House, on a busy workday, they survey the room and can see only two other Black producers across not only 1Xtra, but also its sister station, Radio 1.

**"A lot of people left last year. That was among this**

**whole 'Black Lives Matter' stuff -- we lost 5 DJs over the summer, including Sideman. That was crazy."**

In August 2020, DJ Sideman resigned from his Saturday mid-morning show on 1Xtra as a result of his employer's refusal to condemn the use of the N-word by a white news journalist.

A multitude of listening sessions took place at the BBC over the summer of 2020, which led to an outpouring of painful and traumatic experiences detailing incidents of bullying and everyday microaggressions for staff of colour who work at the organisation.

1Xtra had become a stepping stone for white people to move into Radio 1, rather than a destination for people who want to celebrate 1Xtra's music and culture, according to an insider source.

**"Nobody is saying that you have to be Black or brown to appreciate Black culture, obviously not, but people being hired, who were not Black or brown ...didn't have the integrity to work on the station."**

The 1Xtra employee explains how an appreciation of 1Xtra's music was simply not a requirement of the job. At recruitment boards, interview questions to potential

employees did not reference Black culture. Instead, "you could get the job by talking about generic things, like the Olympics"

**"... but when it came down to explaining how important Nipsey Huddle [an American rapper] was, those kinds of questions were not being asked and therefore, 'diversity was tough'."**

### **Would Reclaiming 'Black Music' Help to Solve the Problem?**

Reclaiming the 'Black' in 'Black music' will not solve systemic racism, but for many people of colour in the British music industry, it is at least an acknowledgment of where the music comes from. Vin Gader was manager of 'The Skatalites' in the 1990s. He says that they would probably tell you that their Ska sound came from:

**"... listening to Jazz and Mento, so the history there is long. I think the Black sound comes in a spiritual way. It is the Soul-ness of it."**

A *New York Times* audio series, 1619 podcast<sup>4</sup> traces the deep roots of Black music in the birth of American music itself. It tracks how the Black sound has permeated all genres today. It can be heard in the 'gravelly tones of the white

**"I see it as a catch-all term that allows white artists to do what is classed as Black music, it felt like it was to champion them. So, I think the change is good to show there is a wind of change. I don't think anyone will be fighting to keep it."** Yaw Owuso

singer Kenny Loggins' for example; "like he is scraping the bottom of a pan to get all the good bits off of it before you pour the gravy in".

Black music has become the popular culture, according to music exec., Yaw Owusu.

"Streaming has allowed us to measure this impact in the mainstream, and it is undeniable" he says, "people have known that Hip-Hop is the biggest form of music forever," but it was only when the download figures from streaming sites were revealed, that "the maths and the push through of Black music... as the dominant genre of music" became clear."

Latest figures compiled by Billboard/MRC Data show that the number one category for audio and video streams and downloads in the US were for Rap/Hip Hop/R&B, followed by Rock and then Pop.<sup>5</sup>

Given that this is the case, you might expect that 'Black music' is the principal sound that is recognisable on the A playlist of 1Xtra's sister station, Radio 1. Radio 1 enjoys a rich historical legacy on UK analogue radio that dates back to 1967. 1Xtra was launched on DAB just under two decades ago. Radio 1's lineage affords it an elevated status, with the budget to match (£38 million compared to 1Xtra's £8 million).<sup>6</sup>

*BBC Group Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20 Pg 138*

Disparity between the stations exists on many levels, the big one is the weekly listening figures which, for Radio 1, is ten times greater than for its 'sister' station. It may be more accurate to say that 1Xtra is the 'poor cousin' of Radio 1.

"Black culture is furnishing popular culture, which is fabulous, as long as we remember where it started." For a senior 1Xtra employee, respecting this fact is a key element of any successful diversity and inclusion policies in music radio.

'Respect', is one of the three litmus tests that are detailed in the *If Ever You're Listening* blog for recognising the cultural appropriation of music. The other two are: giving credit to Black artists, and, to ensure something new is made from what came before, rather than just taking it as your own.

In an emotional and highly charged radio appearance, in 2014, the Black artist, Azealia Banks, speaks of how hurtful she finds the white Australian 'rapper', Iggy Azalia, who, in one of her lyrics, refers to being 'a runaway slave master'. Iggy Azalia was nominated for a Grammy award in the rap category.

"I feel just like, in this country, whenever it comes to our things – like Black issues or Black politics or Black music ... there's this undercurrent of kinda, like, a 'fuck you'." Banks refers to there being a cultural "smudge out", which "tells Black kids you don't own shit, not even the shit you created for yourself."

Former 1Xtra DJ Flight, keenly feels there has been cultural appropriation of Black music in the Drum 'n' Bass scene. She was part of the original 1Xtra launch team and hosted a weekly show for 5 years, until 2007. The roots of DnB are embedded in Jamaican sound systems; Jazz, Funk, Soul and Reggae. But when the Drum 'n' Bass label, Hospital Records, bought the rights to the back

catalogue of Reggae label, Jet Star, in 2020, all of the 18 remixes they put out were by white producers, except for 1<sup>8</sup>.

"The amount of people who think it's just fine to sample any old Ragga vocal – they don't even know what the person is saying, but they stick it into the tune, they put red, yellow and green on their artwork ...that kind of shit – very superficial."

She also notes the switch to white DJs at the BBC. In a team which used to consist of 5 Black DJs across both Radio 1 and 1Xtra (DJ Flight, L Double, Bailey, Fabio & Grooverider), today, in 2021, there is only one white Canadian, representing British DnB music.

"I could feel my whole career and achievements being erased before my eyes" she says.

1Xtra's Ace and Seani B also feel as if their music has been taken from them and replaced by white line-ups. In their Black Lives Matter Talks Special they explain how;

"Our aesthetics are scary, so [the solution is] let's give people what's not scary to deliver the music they love, which is our music."

Seani then lays down his truth, and asks a question that is inspired by seeing so many white artists representing Reggae and Dancehall, both on radio and on festival rosters: "Can you imagine if I was a white Dancehall DJ??" He is thought to be referring to a disparity in treatment and opportunities offered to the white Dancehall DJ, Toddla T, who left 1Xtra after 11 years in August, 2020, during the summer of Black Lives Matter protests. Toddla T is also married to veteran Radio 1 DJ Annie Mac.

1Xtra has recently appointed its first Black Station Head, Faron McKenzie. Music executive, Yaw Owusu, knows him, and thinks that,

"moving Black people into positions of influence" will see things "play out very differently". Already, line-ups are starting to change. Rampage and The Heartless Crew are among the Black DJs who have been brought back to the schedules.

## Historic Racial Inequalities and Exploitation Play Out Today

After decades working in the UK music industry with Jamaican and South Asian artists, Vin Gadhur is "still shocked" by how many white faces he sees, even in departments representing global regions whose populations are Black or brown. He is concerned about the exploitation of Black artists.

"As musicians [The Skatalites] were highly respected but, economically, they weren't. When I discovered them again in the 1990s, they were in New York State doing manual jobs, and I was thinking; "These guys are geniuses, why haven't they been given the income due to them?"

It is a common complaint voiced by music industry diversity campaigners, pointing to systemic inequalities resulting in poor contract terms for Black artists when they are signed. Shauni Caballero, speaking to *Power Up*, a long-term initiative to address racial disparities in the music sector, says, "I tell them, they have a duty – the major labels especially –

because you profit so heavily off these artists, there are certain things you need to tell them... at least give them the basics of understanding [about] their publishing rights."

Exploitative practises in the music industry date way back too, of course. In the 1950s, the father of rock n' roll, Chuck Berry, spoke of his managers and promoters, "who were usually friends, or businessmen, as there was a lot of money transacted that I didn't know about," he said in a BBC interview.<sup>9</sup>

## If the huge and continued success of Black music tells us anything, it's that audiences do not need a dilution or cover-up of 'Black' to make it more marketable or palatable.

When the interviewer asks him what advice he would give to a young artist, he replies;

"Major in math, then take up music, which is really half math, and then major in human nature."<sup>10</sup>

This remains essential advice for Black music artists in 2021.

Long-term plans to address systemic racism are currently underway, instigated by influential UK music industry insiders on a variety of fronts. These include *Power Up*, which offers grants to Black creators, combined with professional network support. The founder of the MOBO Awards, Kanya King, is launching a platform to connect Black people to mentors, and the *Black Music Coalition* presents a

manifesto for change. For Yaw Owusu, the solution ultimately lies in "independence and autonomy". He gives Stormzy and Jamal Edwards as examples to follow.

"We are seeing that people want independence from the corporations. What Jay Z is doing in America, and there is a lot of social and structural stuff to do".

He says it will all take time, another generation perhaps.

As for black music on Radio 1 and 1Xtra, DJ Flight puts it succinctly; "nothing really changes at the BBC".

If a new generation of music artists have any hope of breaking free from the systemic racism in an industry where it runs deep, pulling off the disguise of a well wrapped up term, such as 'urban' is an obvious first step. If the huge and continued success of Black music tells us anything, it's that audiences do not need a dilution or cover-up of 'Black' to make it more marketable or palatable. Recognising its history and culture through people who work in those industries today is necessary to reveal those connections between what happened before and what is still happening today<sup>11</sup>.

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### Representology takeaways

**Severing a genre's links to its cultural heritage has detrimental consequences on the racial diversity of the industry's workforce**

- The term "urban" has played a role in ghettoising Black artists and allowing white artists to appropriate Black culture
- Broadcasters need to remember the cultural importance of the music they play to minority communities and strive for authenticity.
- Will solutions to increase diversity and fight discrimination be less about changing labels and more about who controls the platforms that broadcast the music?







# Sian Vasey

## - disability pioneer inside British broadcasting

**David Hevey looks at the impact of his colleague Sian Vasey OBE (1956-2020), a disabled woman who changed practice and output in British TV both on-screen and behind the camera.**

**By the 1980s, Sian Vasey, a young woman who was a wheelchair user in London, was already heavily involved and making her mark in radical organisations, including the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, UPIAS, and the London Disability Arts Forum, LDAF.**

Key to her involvement was her belief in the social model of disability – that you are disabled by society's exclusions and not by your impairment – as opposed to the medical model of disability.

The 1980s were times of great social changes for us. After ITV's *Link*, a monthly programme that was created by Richard Creasey in 1975, it was six years before the BBC had its own regular programme, made by Deaf and disabled people, *See Hear*. The programme eventually came about following a protest in Downing Street, at which Deaf people marched, and then presented the government with a TV set that had been fixed to have no sound, just vision. This was before soft subtitles ("closed caption") were a feature in TV sets; and seeing a presenter using British Sign Language was very rare. Deaf people, including the scholar and activist Paddy Ladd, protested that they paid the licence fee, but got nothing back.

The National Union of the Deaf had gained some independent funding and made a programme, *Signs of Life*, that the BBC broadcast

in its *Open Door* slot on 10th May, 1979, but the BBC refused to take the idea forward and to make a regular programme for Deaf and hearing-impaired people. In response, the National Union of the Deaf worked with the British Deaf Association to create the Deaf Broadcasting Campaign, DBC, in 1980. The DBC organised and delivered the 'broken' TV set to the Prime Minister in 1981, as well as a petition to MPs in Parliament. The news cameras filmed the 'broken' TV being carried in through the door of No 10. The campaign struck home, Government ministers spoke to the BBC and *See Hear* was green-lit to start in October, 1981, and was to be broadcast once a month. (BSL Zone, 2019).

As a terrible footnote, even in 2021, the Downing Street press conferences still refuse to include a BSL interpreter, unlike the daily pandemic press conferences in Wales and Scotland, and in Northern Ireland, where there are two interpreters in-vision, with BSL and with Irish Sign Language.

Like Sian, I had joined in with the disability movement in the 1980s, and by the early 1990s I was heavily involved in trying to change how disabled people were represented in media channels. I was producing alternative ways of showing disabled people, including *The Creatures Time Forgot* project – posters, a book (Hevey 1992), and TV coverage – which had a significant impact in helping to move disability representation away from the old, doomy, monochrome victim imagery that was dominated by charity advertising and other medical model approaches.

My point was that the 'enfreakment' of disabled people served able-bodied fear-management, not disabled people. This hit a nerve, and I was both praised and attacked in equal measure across the media, including the news press.

However, a major event happened as a consequence of this media coverage, which was that Sian Vasey knocked on my council flat door one day and asked me if I would like to make a TV mini-series with her, based on the ideas in my book. I knew Sian a little from street protests by the disability

company, which we saw as a way of weakening our disabled people-led drive. We said: "no, we will deliver *Poor Dear* from our own new disabled staff-led company, Criptic Productions Ltd.", and, after some arguing, the BBC executives agreed. They even went along with our *crip* spelling in Criptic. Sian was the producer-presenter, I was the producer-director and, putting ourselves under some pressure, we made three episodes in six months.

As the presenter, Sian was a brilliant interviewer – constantly pushing those we interviewed – charity bosses,

Then, during the pre-viewings, the BBC executives in the room began to panic again – it was too anti-charity, there were not enough non-disabled people in it, it was too pro-rights, it was too political, and so on. We managed to persuade them that this was a true position of what many disabled people felt, and still feel, about charity. In one of the episodes, dealing with how charity promotes a cure, in contrast to disabled people, who were more focused on access than they were on cure, the BBC pushed us to include 'more disabled people who want to be cured'; and we pushed back, saying, disabled people do not go around waiting for cures, they do go around pushing for barriers to be removed, and you would not be telling the journalistic truth if you pushed this 'crips want cures' position. The BBC executives began to despair. At one point, one executive said that we would be hugely criticised for 'attacking charities.' Good, we replied, bring it on – because those old-school disability charities had to change.

After *Poor Dear* was broadcast on BBC1, Sian and I went our separate ways into two separate independent production companies for a while, before our work aligned again, and we both became producer-directors at the BBC Community and Disability Programmes Unit, "the DPU", to most of *our* people. By the time we joined it, in the mid-1990s, the DPU was regularly making films and programmes about how disabled people saw the world. The DPU closed in 2000.

For me, the most interesting thing about the DPU – staffed by disabled people – was that many of the radicals from the disability movement were there in-house. It was people like me, Sian Vasey, Elspeth Morrison, and others. But there were also some 'play it safe' non-radicals, who just wanted to 'be in telly' and didn't really care about changing disabled representation or reflecting the movement, which Sian, Elspeth and I very much cared about.

Indeed, one of my early films there was *Desperate Dan*, for which I was the executive producer. It was a documentary about the Direct Action Network (DAN), a street-protest organisation, and it was very much a film supporting their demands. We got around the calls for 'BBC balance' by arguing that other more naff producers (we did say that, we were young!) in the BBC were making old-school 'poor cripple' TV and we were showing the reality of the new, radical social model approaches – and we were getting large audiences with these new approaches.

Sian brought her usual brilliant journalism and constant drive. She would turn around stories faster than anyone else in the unit and, with her lived experience of disability, drive for rights and experience in television (she was one of the very early pioneers working on ITV's *Link* disability programme, before working at the BBC), Sian became the formidable journalist of the DPU. While I made my landmark series, *The Disabled Century*, Sian drove much of *From the Edge*. For the first time, there was a superb disabled talent pool, both behind and in front of camera at the DPU – and Sian was one of the stars from whom we all learned what are now considered to be the tools of the trade.

So why was Sian such a pioneer? From being one of the few disabled on-screen talents, she continued in television as a director, producer, presenter, journalist and writer, through sheer tenacity – she would never let an interviewee off the

**... disabled people do not go around waiting for cures, they do go around pushing for barriers to be removed, and you would not be telling the journalistic truth if you pushed this 'crips want cures' position.**

movement, but did not know her well at that point. My flat was accessible, and in she came, proceeding to lay out how she wanted us to use parts of my book to pitch a three-part series to the BBC in which we would take apart the very negative charity models which dominated too many disabled people's lives. It seemed such a worthwhile punt that I said, "Fine". About a month later, we were commissioned to make *Poor Dear*, a three-part series, for the BBC.

Then came the inevitable commissioning meetings, pressuring us to compromise from our radical positions; the BBC executives asked us to work with this or that non-disabled independent

advertising execs, and so on – to justify their medical model positions on camera. Sian interviewed with great rigour and great charm, which disconcerted those charity bosses we interviewed, who were very much unused to such a 'radical crip' being so sharp, so shrewd, and so friendly, all at once, in each interview. Many were furious when the camera was off! And Sian just smiled her charming smile and never became engaged in the off-camera rows with them.

hook, but her persistence was always utterly charming. However, she was much more than that. She was a stalwart of the fight for rights for disabled people, and she easily bridged the space between being in the movement and being in television. In other words, her head didn't turn because she was 'in tele.' If anything, it gave her a platform from which to fight for more inclusion. And we all knew that if you could get the real stories and tell them in innovative ways, then you could get audiences in the millions, as opposed to the old style 'poor old Harry is wheelchair bound' material, with sad piano music, which still dominates too much of the media, even though it no longer draws large audiences.

Around 1999, and after several years in the DPU, I moved onto BBC's *Modern Times* to make more films, and Sian moved on too, moving into the wider media ... and for a while we lost touch.

To new generations, Sian Vasey being an incredible TV pioneer and a role-model for front-of-camera disabled presenters, and for behind-camera disabled crews, was all about the control of content. And it was not only her control of TV content, but also her pushing for a radical and rights-based approach with which to create new ways for TV to show and see disabled people and our allies, an approach which is still fresh and authentic all these years later.

If the BBC ever puts up statues, then I say that one should be of Sian Vasey, saying – *She Led the Way in Radical Disability Television*. And I'd place her at the BBC's main gates.

David Hevey worked for the BBC's Disability Programmes Unit during the 1990s and produced the landmark history series *The Disabled Century* (1999)

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WHY IT'S  
NOT OK  
TO CALL  
A FEMALE  
DIRECTOR  
'FLUFFY':



# The impact of negative female stereotypes in the television industry and strategies for change

**Melanie Gray** outlines existing and evolving research around discrimination against women in UK television

## Female Discrimination in the Television Industry

Globally, the UK television industry is upheld as being progressive, leading the response to the rapid changes in broadcasting that have been brought about by converging technology and changing consumer habits. However, although innovative on many fronts, when viewed through the lens of gender discrimination, we have to question whether the industry is progressive enough.

Even with apparent legal protection from the *Equality Act*, 2010, female discrimination in the workplace still appears to be prevalent, with millions of women in employment being affected by different forms of sexual discrimination (Margolis et al. 2015) and gender discrimination, costing the global economy up to £9 trillion annually in wasted potential (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). In 2015, the UK television industry did not seem to be bucking this trend, with *The Observer* reporting that 99% of women working in this

industry have experienced sexism (2015). Although not a reason to rejoice, headline figures such as these have meant that female discrimination in the UK television industry has received much wider attention and support in recent years, from both in- and outside the industry. This is partially due to high profile cases, such as the BBC's 2017 publication of its on-air high earners, and the criticism it received about the huge disparity between its male and female presenters, but also from organisations such as Directors UK and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, who are campaigning for gender balance change. Ofcom, the UK television industry's regulator, is trying to hold the television broadcast industry to account through its work on Diversity and Equal Opportunities (Ofcom 2020), and it can be argued that there does seem to be some positive progress being made here, with the proportion of women employed in the industry now closely reflecting the UK working age population more generally (47% of

which is female). However, women are still significantly under-represented at senior levels throughout the industry (Ofcom 2020). Outside of the industry, female discrimination has an even wider stage. In this regard, the work of the United Nations and its Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), has shed important light on the significant harm caused by gender stereotypes and the impact that gender stereotyping has on society at large. The work of these different mechanisms and organisations has helped to propel the issue of gender stereotyping onto a much broader and more public stage, yet we require further understanding and corrective action.

To date, academic research looking at the television industry has largely focused on the representation of females in front of the camera (Mulvey, 1999; Wedel, 2003 Oliver, 2017; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Saz-Rubio, 2018), with the voices of those behind the screen still being relatively hidden. However, it is these female voices from behind

the screen that can have so much impact on what we see on the screen. For example, a report by *Common Sense*, in 2017, demonstrates the power of television in shaping how children learn about gender, influencing how boys and girls look, think, and behave. *Common Sense* (2017) identified that the depictions of gender roles in the media affect children at all stages of their development. Through their analysis, media messages were seen to influence children in relation to a variety of aspects, including their own feeling of self-worth and how they value others, and to what they think about career aspirations. If those behind the screen are influencing television content, and if the gender stereotypes being experienced by those women are prohibiting women from progressing to more influential roles, then this negatively impacts on them, and on society at large. Negative female stereotypes behind the screen in the UK television industry are holding us back — politically, economically, and socially.

Whilst acknowledging that there does appear to be an awareness and appetite for change in combating the negative female stereotypes in the television industry, this paper seeks to explore what we know about the female discrimination that is being experienced by those who work behind the television screen. It then attempts to move beyond the problem by discussing strategies that are taking place to make change happen, and considers what else could be done. In order to explore this, we must first look at understanding what the female stereotype is, and why it is problematic.

## The Female Stereotype: Characteristics and Harmful Nature

According to the United Nations (2013), harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping are some of the root causes for discrimination, and can lead to violations of a wide array

female discrimination in the TV industry, even before action can be taken to overcome it. A useful definition of what constitutes a stereotype is provided by Ashmore and Del Boca (1981), who suggest that stereotypes are “a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people” and, accordingly, female stereotypes are a set of beliefs about the attributes of women. This set of beliefs has led to normalised views on the roles that should be performed by women (Haines, Deaux & Lofaro, 2016), for example, they see that child care responsibilities are the responsibility of females, and often lead to harmful or narrow perceptions of woman. In the workplace, these female stereotypes are harmful if they limit or inhibit professional careers (Heilman 2012). The practice of ascribing specific attributes or roles that are based only on an individual's inclusion within a specific group, is gender stereotyping, and it is this practice which fundamentally leads to female discrimination in the workplace (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Harmful female stereotyping in the workplace can be both hostile, e.g., seeing a female as irrational, or benign, e.g., seeing females as caring. Unfortunately, gender stereotypes and the discrimination that results, are compounded by other stereotypes, for example, those relating to religion or disability, which have a disproportionately negative impact on women (United Nations, 2020).

These beliefs, and therefore the stereotypical portrayals of women, are linked to the cultural, social, and

hegemonic norms of society, which are ingrained in daily lives over a prolonged period of time. These patterns of thinking are reflected in the meaning that people attach to various aspects of life, and they are played out in the institutions of a society, such as workplaces. According to Hofstede's cultural characteristics (2003), gender stereotypes are closely aligned with the culture of the country. The UK has been identified as being a relatively highly masculine culture, scoring 66% on Hofstede's masculinity dimension; valuing attributes such as assertiveness and the drive for success. These cultural attributes can be deemed to translate into the gender stereotypes that are prevalent in the UK and in other societies, which are then transposed into workplaces that identify success and drive as male characteristics. These ingrained characteristics, which together create a stereotype, make people and society perceive the stereotype to be normal, and people are then categorised and judged accordingly. Lester and Ross (2003) argue that gender stereotypes in society create female discrimination in employment, as the categorisation, inference and judgment placed on females leads to an inability to see the individual beyond the stereotype.

When looking at what constitutes the female stereotype, research uses adjectives such as ‘weaker’, ‘timid’ and ‘passive’. Bernd and Thomas (1991) state that the female stereotype is less assertive and less active than the male stereotype, yet females are also more communal, understanding and caring when compared

**These ingrained characteristics, which together create a stereotype, make people and society perceive the stereotype as normal, and people are then categorised and judged accordingly.**

of human rights. By reflecting on female stereotypes, looking at how they are formed and why they continue to prevail, this provides a starting point from which to understand

to men; so, the stereotyping potentially contributes to the different treatments of males and females. The stereotypical attributes defining masculine and feminine qualities can be argued to be why more males are to be found in the more senior positions, if compared to females, as males are associated with the managerial qualities of being assertive in their careers and thus are considered more prone to success. The perception of females as the weaker and more subservient sex reinforces the misconception that they are incapable of accessing more dominant roles in both society and the workplace. Females in senior roles face being further undermined, as they are perceived to be 'tokens' (Kanter 1997), rather than as having justifiably achieved the same roles as their male counterparts. With fewer women in more senior roles, and those that are there often being viewed with mirth, then this symbolises the continued presence and reinforcement of female discrimination.

In addition, as well as not being perceived as being equally capable in the more powerful roles, the sexualised view of women has severe negative consequences. If women are first and foremost seen as sexual beings then, in the workplace, women are being perceived as sex objects, even when they are successful in their careers (Thio & Taylor, 2012; Gill & Baker, 2019).

## Negative Female Stereotypes Behind the Television Screen: Type and Impact

As already highlighted, there has been limited research to date that specifically explores the gender bias that exists behind the screen in the UK television industry.

Research conducted by Bournemouth University, in 2020, into the experiences of women who work in production and directing roles within UK television aimed to provide richer insights into those females behind the screen. By interviewing a number of females in production, directing and writing roles, more is understood about the gender stereotyping which occurs and the impact this can have. The research has provided a rich understanding of the type of gender bias which occurs behind the TV screen due to negative female stereotypes, highlighting the explicit behaviour and feelings that occur due to an unconscious bias. The women we spoke to experienced a lack of humanity and respect within the workplace.

**"males have made comments about female directors, being woolly-headed, or fluffy, or scatty."**

**"one of my nicknames was pedantic Pippa. I don't think they'd have a pedantic Paul."**

The women from the sample also identified that no matter what the quality of a female's work was, women were automatically remembered with negative stereotypical impressions.

**"If a woman is making a lot of demands they are seen as being difficult, but for a man it's not frowned upon."**

This makes it harder for females to reach the same professional levels as males, thus reinforcing the gender gap between males and females, and enhancing the glass ceiling effect. The Bournemouth University research identified that people are unconsciously prioritising males over females, based on stereotypes and their gender, with the ingrained perceptions of females creating explicit discrimination.

**"People who work in the industry unconsciously have a set of beliefs or ideas about women that influence the way that they treat them."**

What was also experienced by those women who were interviewed as part of the Bournemouth University research, was that women were seen as sexual beings, rather than as whole persons, as professional persons, who just happen to be female.

**"I had a boss... he said, I had this dream about you last night and you did this and you did that, and all this other stuff."**

And the more subtle comments about appearance and the way a female looks:

**"Constant comments about your appearance... I think appearance is the first thing people commented on. So that was the forefront of their mind... you wouldn't immediately comment on a guy's appearance."**

This objectification demonstrates the reinforcement of the sexualised female negative stereotype, concurring with Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), who argued that a universal theme running

through all forms of female discrimination is that women are treated as a body, an entity that is valued predominantly for its use by others.

The focus on, and the reinforcement of, these negative female stereotypes has far reaching implications for those women who are working behind the screen in the UK television industry, and for the influence of their work.

In Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, (2013), females are identified as having lower self-confidence, and this is due to female discrimination, and lower self-esteem creates further internal barriers, which hold them back even further from being considered equal to their male counterparts. The Bournemouth University work supports this, with the sample of women identifying that females who work behind the screen in the UK TV industry are emotionally impacted upon by female discrimination in a way which lowers self-esteem and provokes negative feelings about themselves and their value as professionals:

**"I didn't feel competent enough, even though I had that 30 years experience. I still didn't have the confidence."**

It is not only negative emotional feelings that result from the continuous discrimination caused by female stereotypes, but there are some very real financial and career implications. Margolis et al. (2015) argue that the most covert female discrimination occurs when a woman does not get a job, a decision that is based purely on her gender.

This is also supported by the Bournemouth University research:

**“Males who aren’t as experienced, or who haven’t been there as long as women, have been given opportunities over other females.”**

Females who work in what can be perceived to be ‘non-traditional’ jobs, such as those in the TV industry, are consistently looking for ways to overcome stereotypes that define what females can and cannot do. According to Margolis et al. (2015), the glass ceiling for females exists, and it is extremely restrictive on the progression of women. Research by Ross and Padovani (2017), supported by a comprehensive review of the American media industry by McKinsey (2020), provides evidence of this, highlighting that although females hold many of the media-related careers, the powerful executive positions remain male-dominated. Women who enter the media industry are leaving at a higher rate than their male counterparts, with every step on the career ladder having fewer and fewer women on it. This is neatly summarised in the *McKinsey Report* (2020), which states:

**“A woman graduating with a degree in mass communications or journalism will walk across a stage where six out of every ten students are women. If she’s hired into the industry, her entry-level class will consist of five women in every ten hires. Further up the corporate ladder, at the transition from senior manager to vice president, one woman from this group, on average, will drop out of the pipeline. This gets even worse towards the top, with fewer than three of every ten executives being a woman.”**

The key reason that has been identified for this is the culture of negative stereotypes, of biased behaviour that detrimentally affects women’s day-to-day experiences in the workplace. The *McKinsey Report* also highlighted that 27% of the women surveyed say that gender has played a role in their missing out on a rise in pay, a promotion, or a chance to get ahead, as opposed to only 7% of men. What’s more, 35% of women identified that they expect their gender to make it harder to get a pay rise or promotion in the future.

When we consider that what appears on television is greatly influenced by those from behind the screen, the impact of negative female stereotypes within the TV industry can be felt well beyond the workplace. If women are feeling discriminated against, and are either not able to have their voice heard, or are choosing to leave the industry, then it will be men who are in those senior positions which shape the content we see. Ofcom (2020) identified that people want programmes that authentically portray life across the UK, but we cannot expect TV broadcasters to represent women authentically if women are not truly represented as employees in the TV industry. This leads to a further perpetuation of the female stereotype, instead of helping to push boundaries by creating aspirational, non-stereotypical characters, television too often falls back on tired gender stereotypes.

Comprehensive research by *Common Sense* shows that children who are exposed to gender stereotypes have their behaviour and attitudes shaped for years. The effects on children of these biased gendered portrayals include:

girls becoming focused on their appearance; more tolerant views of sexual harassment; and career choices that are limited by gender norms. One of the most consistent themes of Western media is that women are valued primarily for their bodies, and that they primarily exist as sexual objects for others’ sexual use (American Psychological Association, 2007). It’s not surprising, therefore, that older adolescents who watch TV that is saturated with such themes agree with this notion that women are sexual objects. This can be seen in a study by Peter and Valkenburg (2007), and their work with Dutch teens, which identified that teens who watched sexually explicit media endorsed views that women were sexual objects. Further research looking at adolescent girls’ and young-adult women’s exposure to sitcoms and soap operas (Ex et al., 2002) reinforced the traditional view of women as mothers, and the belief that a mother should devote herself to her family and her children. From this insight, girls may therefore learn from television that women’s most important job is as a mother, and to be a mother requires an unrivalled focus on the family, rather than on a career.

It appears that we are in a circle of on-going discrimination. As we have seen, cultural and societal norms lead to stereotypes and negative stereotypical practices, which, in turn, lead to female discrimination behind the screen in the TV industry, and, ultimately, this leads to dominant and negative norms being portrayed on the screen, and then the circle continues, as the society’s beliefs are

reinforced by what is seen on TV.

It is clear that the reinforcement of negative female stereotypes is a key problem for those working within, and wanting to progress in, the UK TV industry, and for society as a whole. By furthering this understanding, we are moving towards the strategies that might be adopted to change this cycle of negativity..

## Strategies to Change the Cycle of Negative Female Stereotyping

There are many obstacles for women who work behind the screen in the UK television industry, but the two biggest challenges appear to be the culture of stereotypically biased behaviour and the lack of female representation in senior positions. These challenges negatively affect women’s day-to-day experiences in the workplace, leading to detrimental personal and career experiences, as well as worrying repercussions for society. Moving beyond the recognition of the problems that are associated with negative gender stereotyping leads to the need for meaningful progress in addressing these harmful stereotypes and negative practices. This requires commitment and action by legal bodies, the TV regulator Ofcom, campaigning organisations, further and higher education, the media and the TV organisations themselves. Each needs to give this issue the serious attention it deserves. Until the time is reached when gender bias



and inequality are eliminated in the television industry, there will still be the need for campaign groups to advocate and fight for change. Campaigning groups, such as Directors UK, who, in their 2014 report, identified both the chronic lack of women directing UK programming and the narrow range of subgenres in which they were getting the opportunity to direct, have been actively campaigning to improve the gender balance across the industry. There are tangible ways that UK TV companies can help to both tackle discrimination and to level the field for women's careers. If companies are truly committed to diversity and gender parity, the issue needs to be a top priority for senior leadership. Ofcom recognises that for television broadcasting to truly resonate and provide genuine positive reflections of society, the programmes that are commissioned for broadcasting are crucial. As it is the commissioning team that plays a key role in deciding which programmes are made, the content that is included, who makes it, and who appears in it, then that team, and the commissioning process, need to genuinely include women and must avoid the negative stereotyping of gender. Ofcom are therefore pushing for this to happen, for the channel controllers, commissioning editors and their teams, to be more representative and inclusive of women. UK TV broadcasters need to commit to making cultural change, to actively look at ways to increase the number of women in powerful roles, as well as to address the underlying cultural bias. Bringing more women into senior positions can help to

ensure greater gender parity, as they can help to draw up and implement visible diversity principles within decision making, for example, by advocating gender targets in recruitment. By making gender diversity and inclusivity top level commitments, change can happen. The BBC's 50:50 Project provides a good example of this. The BBC set a target of having at least 50% of contributions coming from women. In April, 2018, only 36% of the teams associated with the 50:50 Project reported having at least 50% female contributors. By March, 2021, the number of teams with 50% female contributors had increased to 70% (BBC 2021). The BBC also challenged the teams involved in the 50:50 project to maintain equal representation over a longer period of time, in an attempt to really cause cultural change. For the six months from October, 2020, to March, 2021, teams were asked to feature 50% women contributors for at least three months, and not to drop below 45% women contributors. 40% of the teams succeeded, an increase from 18% in March, 2019. The 50:50 project began in London in 2017, but has now expanded to involve 670 BBC teams and more than 100 partner organisations in 26 countries. All are committed to continuing to improve women's representation.

Likewise, ITV has adopted a range of initiatives to improve its inclusion and representation of women. For example, the new diversity criteria in their commissioning strategy, which requires two on-screen and off-screen

measures that are intended to drive diversity and inclusivity. ITV have also set a requirement for any returning series with more than one writer to have female representation. This is in addition to initiatives to support creative diversity, such as Comedy 50:50, which aims to increase the numbers of female writing talents across its comedy genre output.

Attitudes derived from negative stereotypes may be deeply held, so one-off initiatives will not be enough to change behaviours around female stereotypes. True change will require a structured and committed programme of diversity training, communication, leadership modelling and support. Enveloping this in a constant space for dialogue, allowing unacceptable behaviour to be called out and dealt with, as well as generating new ideas and initiatives, are what may lead to the cultural change required. Ofcom recognises this, and is encouraging the television broadcasters to have systematic and explicit programmes and practices in place to tackle this gender bias.

By reflecting on current research and looking at new

and evolving insights which explore the negative female stereotypes that occur behind the scenes in the television industry, it is clear that gender discrimination is still very much an issue that impacts upon the industry, and on society as a whole. The culture of gender biased behaviour, and the lack of women behind the screen who are in senior positions, are receiving greater attention and action, but it is argued that much more still needs to be done. Until it is, we will continue to see women creating their own strategies in order to cope. There are those who work longer hours than their male counterparts, or who create work personas in order to avoid the stereotypes, so females are doing what they can to navigate female discrimination. Without change leading to an end to female gender discrimination in the UK television industry, the industry will continue to fail its female workforce and society.

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## Representology takeaways

### Challenging gender discrimination in television plays an important role in encouraging wider societal change

- Senior leadership matters, and addressing women's significant under-representation at commissioning editor and channel controller level is of paramount importance
- Regulatory and legal bodies should working with educational and campaigning institutions to tackle workplace gender stereotyping
- Initiatives aimed at bringing more women into the industry behind the scenes need to be amplified and praised.



# PROTEST, RESEARCH

# and CAMPAIGN:

# Equal Opportunities Network 1985

Director and producer  
**Debbie Christie** considers  
the success of campaigns against  
racism and sexism at the BBC  
in the mid-1980s



**In 1985, I was working in a BBC building with over 1000 staff, and almost everyone over the grade of assistant producer was a white middle class man.**

A group of us decided to set up an Equal Opportunities Network. It was a vague, high-spirited idea. We wanted to collect information about sexism and racism and to propose bold new changes. There was a woman prime minister, but there were no women in decision-making roles in the building. The racism was obvious. There were no Black, Asian or people from any minority ethnic background in the building, either in front of, or behind, the camera. Manchester has always been a multicultural city but, behind the doors of the BBC, it was very white.

We produced a report, that we presented to management, about how we viewed our working conditions, along with suggested action points. On the last page of our 9 page report to the management we wrote: *"we look forward to swift and clear changes in the BBC"*.

What started as a thought became, for a few months, a shout, a protest and a campaign.

## Did we achieve anything and what did we learn?

I wish I could say that our campaign now looks like an outdated piece of social history but, sadly, it does not. Although there has been a huge change in the TV industry over the past 30 years, much of what we highlighted in our report remains unresolved today.

As I have moved through the ranks of TV production, from being a stropky researcher to becoming a producer on a high profile weekly current affairs programme, to being an Executive Producer, the issues of lack of inclusion, equality and diversity have remained all too apparent.

While the faces on screen have become more diverse, the people in charge of decision making haven't changed much. Diverse life experiences, views and perspectives, are still rarely reflected in the content.

The politics of feminism and Equal Opportunities were loud and active in mid 80s Britain. The Industrial Society commissioned a report on **'Women and Power'** and the NUJ was actively campaigning for Equal Opportunities Officers in the workplace.

We were fortunate with our noisy campaign, because it came off the back of the Sims Report. Monica Sims was a well-respected Controller of BBC Radio 4 who had been invited to conduct a report on Women in the BBC. She requested and analysed the data on women. The statistics were shocking.



She also identified what she called “a macho style of management” and “the difficulties presented because the child-bearing years from 25–35 coincide with those years considered crucial in career terms”.

Sims wrote: “Real power, even in production departments where there are a number of women producers, was in the hands of men”.

When things got a little tough for our campaign, it was extraordinarily helpful that we not only had the statistics, but that this quietly spoken successful woman had explicitly identified the problems.

Our campaign took anonymised testimony from a wide range of women. Now, post #MeToo, they read quite shockingly, but, at the time, we thought they were small things that made life uncomfortable.

Here are some of them from our document, which was sent to the management on 12th July 1985:

- 2 women at job interviews had been asked whether they planned to get married.
- A woman had been asked by her male Colleague not to wear trousers at work because they were unfeminine (these were smart trousers, not scruffy jeans).
- Women felt they were often ‘rewarded’ by being given a peck on the cheek or by being bought a drink. They would have preferred to have been told more directly, as their male colleagues had been, that they had done a good job.
- A woman’s contract was terminated when she said she was pregnant.
- We found that there were no women in production who were combining TV production with bringing up children.
- In TV production, there were only 2 women above the grade of assistant producer.

My own experiences echoed this patronising attitude to women. During my initial job interview, the HR representative asked whether I had a fiancé in Manchester, and whether I would be lonely, as a girl moving to a new city? I had by that time been to university, worked in Kenya, and had also worked in a refugee camp in the Middle East.

Our report highlighted that this bias was not only verbal, but also that people declared it in print. We quoted from an article in the BBC’s in-house magazine, Peter Hill, the editor of *Rough Justice*, talks about the production team: “It’s an all-male team. I’m not sexist, but situations can develop which a woman couldn’t handle. Even if I was prepared to expose one to the kind of risks we take, which I am not”.

**I fear that a largely freelance short term industry, and a society that hasn’t improved statistically for young Black British people, will prove to be tough challenges.**

We found that the lighting crew in the studio were routinely using the words ‘Darkies’ and ‘Winston Kdogos’. When challenged, they explained that they needed to ask if there were any ‘darkies’ in advance of a lighting set up, because if the musicians were dark skinned it altered their lighting rig. We understood that, but we asked them to modify their language. They did.

## Did our findings shock people at the time?

Yes, they did.

Some of our ambitions were combative and probably ill-judged. We asked to turn the subsidised bar, where people gathered to drink at lunchtime and after work, into a subsidised crèche. That certainly met with the wrath and ridicule of many of the staff.

We demanded 5 years (unpaid) maternity leave, with the job being held open.

But we also asked, more realistically, for flexibility for part time work and job sharing, and for race awareness courses for all managers and editors.

Those should have been easy to achieve, but when I returned to the BBC 10 years later, as an Executive Producer, they were still not happening.

Our eagerness for change did achieve something important. Many women took strength from realising that this wasn’t just their own, individual problem. It showed that discrimination was not just happening occasionally, but that it was a widescale, persistent and embedded problem.

I wish, of course, that we had pushed harder and looked for more evidence. We missed the most significant abuse of young women in the building. We all used the BBC canteen. It was a joke amongst some of us that Stuart Hall, the BBC North West News presenter, who famously wore a pink shirt unbuttoned to show his medallion, stood a little too close to us in the queue, and sometimes rubbed into us ‘in a jokey way’. We didn’t even put that in our report. Now, of course, we know that he also invited school girls who were interested in working in television into his office, and he indecently assaulted them. In January, 2013, he pleaded guilty to historic charges of indecent assault involving a 16 year old, a 17 year old, and a 9 year old in 1983, and a 13 year old in 1984. We didn’t suspect at the time that he was doing that. And we didn’t look for it.

We did meet some hostility.

Many of the women in the building sent us information, but they didn’t want to be seen coming to the meetings, because they felt it would damage their chances of employment and promotion.

I was a researcher. I had no responsibilities. I was on a short-term contract. I was ‘fired up’ and, with the zeal of youth, I just knew we were right. I also had a decent boss, who I knew wouldn’t succumb to any pressure around the renewal of my contract. He knew which direction society was travelling in, and he was sympathetic.

One small story. One of my sympathetic bosses employed a secretary who was Black British. I think he managed to do this by circumventing the BBC pool



and going to a secretarial agency. She was not only excellent at her job, but she brought a perspective. She mentioned, in passing, that her boyfriend, who had lived in Manchester all of his life, was being deported. We were shocked. These stories were rarely reported. We did an item on it. We asked questions of the Home Office. He got a reprieve.

We were challenging a culture, and perhaps that challenge was easier because, in 1985, sexism and racism were more overt.

I think some of what helped me to navigate a culture that wasn't welcoming to women was that I had grown up in a family, and at a girl's grammar school where it was unthinkable that a woman wouldn't be as clever as a man. I am very aware that people who have been brought up in disabled, non-white, or low-income households, have often not lived in a society that has given them those confident messages.

I was discussing our 1985 campaign with a friend who was involved at the time. She said that, in hindsight, she felt much more intimidated in the BBC building by her working-class background and Mancunian accent than by her gender. We weren't even asking questions then about socio-economic inclusion. Although, interestingly, her experience was that she came in as a secretary and has since progressed to work as an executive in a major multinational media company, she was at least in the building back in 1985.

Within a few years of our report, the statistics on Women in Television were shifting fast. They reflected huge societal changes for women, but I think it was

significant that there were already women in lower paid jobs in BBC buildings in the '80s who knew they were capable of doing the better paid jobs. That wasn't the case for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people, who weren't even in the building.

This societal lack of confidence remains, I think, an issue for all recruitment of diverse staff. It is now particularly true for people from low-income families. They don't see themselves being employed in TV.

## What did I learn?

I wish we had pushed harder. I wish we had done more. I am embarrassed that we didn't seek out non-white voices outside the TV industry, who could have informed our campaign.

I have since been involved in many campaigns and initiatives as an executive, but I am still not sure what will create change in the TV industry. I fear that a largely freelance short-term industry, and a society that hasn't improved statistically for young Black British people, will prove to be tough challenges.

I have continued to sporadically campaign and to seek to influence and improve recruitment as an executive in TV. I am proud that evidence to a House of Commons Select Committee identified my success in recruiting a predominantly Black Asian and Minority Ethnic production team, but our industry has problems that well-meaning executives cannot solve on their own each time they are recruiting for a new series.

My suggestions would be to get the statistics, to persuade as many important

and influential people as possible to go on record with their commitment; to collect 'off the record' testimony so as to look at the patterns that emerge; to shout and complain whenever you feel safe to do so.

However, I don't think we will see significant shifts in employment without clear, targeted recruitment and training, accompanied by 2 year contracts for these new recruits. This should be a priority.

The TV industry needs to welcome not just the people, but the perspectives and ideas that they bring.

For Commissioners, I would suggest that the focus now needs to be on shifting the lens. I have recently Exec'd a series of monologues for BBC 4 that is called 'Crip Tales', and that is written, directed and performed entirely by disabled people. As well as achieving critical success, every one of our writers, who had previously never written for TV, have been offered more work. We have hopefully started them on a career in TV.

If you seek out different voices, there is a richness of content and creative energy which not only enhances the offering to the audience, but that also offers one route along which to broaden the range of people who work in TV.

**Debbie Christie is an Emmy and RTS award winning Television Director and Producer**

## Representology takeaways

### The struggle for diversity in broadcasting has a long, rich history

- Significant changes have been made over the past four decades - women in key positions helped improve gender diversity and have other women's concerns listened to
- Anonymous testimony can be a powerful tool in highlighting problems, showing victims of discrimination that they are not alone.
- Pushes to increase gender representation have often failed to recognise the intersectionality of race and class.



# a BLAc JOURN at THE GUARD





# K alist

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Former *Guardian* columnist  
**Gary Younge** reflects on his  
three decades working at the  
newspaper.



**When I started at the *Guardian* on staff, there were only a handful of Black journalists there. After about six months of shift work, I was offered a staff job on the Foreign Desk as the assistant foreign editor. Staff vacancies there are rare and coveted, so turnover is quite low. By that time, I'd had some experience covering the South African elections in 1994 having been introduced to the *Guardian* initially through a bursary scheme aimed at racial minorities and those who are otherwise underrepresented in journalism and would benefit from assistance. Nobody had me down for that job, and when it was announced there were a few gasps in the office.**

It was a surprising choice in many ways but primarily because I was only twenty-five, which is quite young to be calling correspondents and saying 'How's that intro coming on?' So given my inexperience, it demanded a certain amount of humility. There were a handful of colleagues who resisted taking instruction from me and I had to work really hard to earn their respect.

Race was an important factor. Why wouldn't it be? There's a lot of racism in British society and it would be strange if the *Guardian* was immune. Generally speaking, it was very convivial: people were very pleasant and I was allowed to do quite a lot of stuff. But there was a moment where, in 1995, I edited a series on 'Black Britain', which didn't endear me to some of my other Black colleagues who felt, not unreasonably, that they had been overlooked. The *Guardian* is actually quite a culturally conservative institution – people are there for a long time, and if someone comes in, then you're expected to wait your turn. But when I was doing that series, I had some conversations with white colleagues and was shocked by what they had to say about their Black colleagues. Many assumed that they were all affirmative action hires and that none of them were any good, which was not true. They had effectively discounted them being there for any other reason than that they were Black. I was actually shocked that they thought it and I was even more shocked that they said it to me.

There was a particular moment that crystallised some of these issues. It was just before the publication of the *Macpherson Report* in 1999, the result of the inquiry into institutional racism following the murder of the Black teenager Stephen Lawrence, by which time I'd been at the *Guardian* for a few years. An Asian colleague, Vivek Chaudhary, had been racially abused in the bar that was seen as the '*Guardian pub*'. If we won an award, our management would put a couple of grand behind the bar and everyone would head down the pub. The publican had spoken to a white friend of Vivek's about 'Pakis' moving in and Vivek had gone up and challenged him and the landlord had basically repeated it. Vivek saw in this all the things that the paper was writing about in terms of Macpherson: canteen culture, racist language and stereotyped assumptions.

Vivek raised this at a union meeting. I was travelling for work at the time but from all accounts, his contribution was met with a considerable amount of scepticism and a degree of vilification. He called for the chapel [the NUJ branch] to boycott the pub. The motion was passed but not without resistance and people saying, 'Well, how do we know that what you're saying is true? The publican has a disabled daughter and we're middle-class journalists so why are we beating up on him? We should set up a commission of inquiry to find whether this is true or not.' It felt as if Vivek, and not racism, was in the dock.



The motion was narrowly passed, but when I got back from my trip abroad, Seumas Milne turned to me and said: **'Look, we need you to intervene here.'** I appreciated his intervention and was keen to show solidarity but initially bristled at the notion that I had to clear up a racist mess that I had nothing to do with. My initial response was: **'This isn't my responsibility. I'll boycott the pub, but why is it down to me?'** But I did get involved and it was incredibly exhausting and distressing. We had this fight on our hands and it was very weird and ugly. Various colleagues would take me aside and talk in very opaque terms about their own views: **'I don't want to get into my private life, but you should know that I couldn't possibly be racist'**, and then it would turn out they had a Black wife or they had Black kids by someone who left them. It was as if it was my personal responsibility to fix this thing. And it was very rancorous, because lots of people were not observing the boycott.

Anyway, the Black journalists ended up putting a note up on the wall – a letter to our colleagues within the building – saying that **'our understanding of the Union is that you stand up for each other and it's disheartening to see people not showing solidarity. We just want you to know how really disappointed we are in you and we will not be going to that pub.'** The idea was that if you want to go to a segregated pub, you go to a segregated pub, but we won't be there. This ended with the Union officers opposing the boycott and a big Union meeting, one of

the biggest I'd ever been to, where the chapel voted to reaffirm its commitment to the boycott which led to the resignation of all the chapel's officers. I actually proposed the motion, which was seconded by Katharine Viner, that we reaffirm the boycott. Overall it was a particularly noxious episode.

Once I started in the newsroom after my stint on the Foreign Desk, I was advised (sometimes by the same people) either to write a particular story because it was about Black people and I had special knowledge, or to stop writing about Black people because otherwise people would think that was all you could do. The latter suggestion, I think, often came from a genuinely supportive and even nurturing place. But it was wrong-headed all the same. **'You will become pigeon-holed'** I was told – always in a passive voice, not realising that they were telling me not to write about something I knew a lot about, cared a lot about and could write well about.

This was a constant source of tension. The first column I ever wrote, which was about the Bosnian war, was returned to me with the question: **'Can you add an ethnic sensibility to this?'** It was made clear by the then comment editor that my role was to write about 'Black stuff'. So, it was a struggle for a few years to make it clear that while I did want to write about race, I also wanted to write about other things.

Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you. There really was the danger that someone would pigeonhole you, and it took a while to navigate the situation. Of course, I always thought that race is important and interesting and I wanted to write about it: I wanted to write about the American Black Skiers' Association going to a fascist part of Austria, or about rap classes, or whatever. But I also wanted to write about Ireland and about strikes and about a range of things. So, there was always this assumption of a kind of expertise that was drawn through melanin, for which there was no office

**Race was an important factor. Why wouldn't it be? There's a lot of racism in British society and it would be strange if the Guardian was immune.**

and no resources. It's not like it was established as a specialism, but nevertheless you were expected to produce endless copy about it when required, and to keep it to yourself at other times. We never had a race correspondent as a specialist, which I lobbied for constantly, but there was always at least one Black person in the office they would constantly go to for stories about race. They just never enjoyed the status or the salary of a specialist correspondent.

I do remember there was one article about a report that featured these spurious arguments about how Black people have an Irish future, how Asian people have a Jewish future, and stupid bullshit like that. I was asked ‘**maybe you know some people that we can interview.**’ And I remember thinking that I’m not actually paid to know Black people, or at least I shouldn’t be. That happened a couple of times: ‘**we’re doing a series on men of a certain age, but it turns out they’re all white, so do you know any Black ones we could interview?**’ That kind of thing.

In general, however, there wasn’t an awful lot of casual racism at the *Guardian* that was aimed at me. But there was one time when somebody used the phrase ‘nigger in a woodpile’ in our daily ten o’clock conference, and nobody said anything. So, I wrote to a senior member of staff pointing out that ‘**we write leaders saying that if somebody uses language like that they should be fired.**’ Now, I wasn’t suggesting for a second that the person who said that should be fired, but they should be talked to. ‘**If it’s only me who is offended, forget it. But if you were offended or thought, in retrospect, that it was offensive, then you should talk to him. It shouldn’t come from me but from you.**’ I was quite explicit about it: this stops here if I’m the only person offended; otherwise, it has to come from their superior.

Two minutes later, I get a call from this person who made the comment. ‘Oh, I’m such a cunt – I’m so sorry.’ And it then became my issue and my problem, because ‘**Gary has complained**’. For me, that was a completely reprehensible piece of management. So, while the *Guardian* is almost certainly more honest than most mainstream British newspapers, in terms of what is necessary, it’s nowhere near honest enough.

The *Guardian* is an expression of a particular patrician form of British liberalism, and, as such, the racism one experienced there was mostly benign. It only occasionally came overtly to the surface when directly challenged or pointed out, regardless of how gently or strategically you did it. Those were the moments when you felt like a mask slipped and you were really being tolerated to a certain point. That didn’t happen often, but then it didn’t really have to. Whenever it did take place, it was both shocking and unsurprising.

I didn’t know a Black journalist there who didn’t have to navigate tricky situations. But you also had to put it in context. Would you really be better off somewhere else that didn’t even publicly aspire to equal opportunities and continually wrote reprehensible things about Black people? You can resign from a job, but you can’t resign from racism. It’s out there. As I’ve already said, the *Guardian* isn’t immune. Where would you go? *The Telegraph* or *The Times*? The *Guardian* had its problems, but compared to what? Which other mainstream newspaper was going to publish work by Black, left-wing writers? Ultimately, I had a successful career there for 27 or so years, so whatever problems I did experience there were navigable. But not everyone was so fortunate: some people found it really hard and at some moments it got quite unpleasant. On occasion it could be really draining.

Any criticism had to be coupled with a genuine desire to change the complexion of the paper. That was an aspiration that was embraced from the top, but was shaped, in no small part, by pressure from below. Joseph Harker was absolutely central to this work. Joseph thought that the *Macpherson Report* provided an opportunity, a moment, in which to address underlying problems of racism. He convened the Black journalists and secured a meeting with the editor, Alan Rusbridger, who was very receptive to the idea.

**Sure enough, as the years went on, the number of black journalists grew and became better organised. I found the younger generation more politically sophisticated, conscious and militant than my own which was great to see.**

We talked about making sure that all posts should be advertised, because up to that point, an awful lot of recruitment was run in a very cliquey way – ‘I met this guy’ (and it was usually a guy), ‘I was on this trip’, or ‘so and so is a good guy and gets a pint in’. These practices continue to mitigate against Black and Asian journalists, against women, particularly those with kids, or Muslims – there were all sorts of things that were very wrong. So, it was important to establish some transparency in hiring practices, and to look at what we were publishing and to ask ourselves why, if we’re organising panels, there are no Black people on them. So, some of it was about how there needed to be broader editorial responsibility and some of it was around newsroom culture. You could complain about the shortcomings of this approach, and of particular meetings, but at least they happened, and they probably wouldn’t have happened in most other newsrooms.

Katharine Viner built on that and, in terms of recruitment, ramped it up. Sure enough, as the years went on, the number of Black journalists grew and became better organised. I found the younger generation more politically sophisticated, conscious and militant than my own, which was great to see.

So, for the longest time, the discussion was mostly about hiring and then things like internships, where traditionally people would give their niece, or their godchild, or their friend’s friend, some type of work experience. The Black journalists got a work experience scheme together that saw some quite impressive people, like Reni Eddo-Lodge and Bim Adewunmi, come through it, and others who are doing very well. And then there was also the bursary scheme that I set up, which continues to be a conduit for a lot of talent, including Randeep Ramesh, who is a chief leader writer, Tania Branigan, who is on the leader writing team, Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, who was head of editorial at *gal-dem*, and Hannah Azieb Pool, artistic director and CEO of the *Bernie Grant Centre*.

Gary Younge is a journalist, author, broadcaster and Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. This is an extract from *Capitalism’s Conscience: 200 Years of The Guardian*, edited by Des Freedman, on Pluto Press.

# Capitalism's Conscience

## 200 Years of the Guardian

**Edited by Des Freedman**  
 With essays by Gary Younge / Victoria Brittain / Ghada Karmi / Hannah Hamad / Tom Mills / Natalie Fenton / Mike Berry / Matt Kennard / Mark Curtis / Justin Schlosberg and others

■ ■ A lively history and critique  
 Jonathan Steele





# The Parent Trap



**Actor Adrian Lester navigates his way through balancing home life with working in the creative industries.**

**My wife, Lolita, and I are both freelance creatives. Our jobs can be booked months or days in advance. Work isn't guaranteed, and when we do get the chance to work on a project, it can be all-consuming and may demand irregular hours. Trying to maintain a good work/life balance in this competitive, freelance profession is difficult.**

We book holidays at the last minute, and can rarely commit to anything that is more than a month away, because work might materialise. On the odd occasion, we have not even been able to properly plan celebrations for Christmas or birthdays, which is especially disappointing, particularly when our kids were small.

In order to paint an accurate picture, I had better describe what the balance means to us, though it's going to be different for everyone.

Lolita and I met at drama school. We studied a year apart, learning to prepare ourselves for this erratic industry. We both felt we were part of a new wave of classically-trained actors who needed to change the industry from within. The role models we saw in our profession were unsung heroes whose contributions were completely overlooked, or who were mentioned as a side note.

We left drama school and, luckily, began to get theatre work up and down the country. Before we had children, it was relatively easy for us to see each other wherever we were working. We would travel regularly, visiting each other as much as we could, and would see each other's shows. We performed Shakespeare all over the world, and we worked with some great international artists.

While Lolita was pregnant with our first child, she was on a two-month tour in the U.S. A few months later, our first child was born while I was in the middle of a year-long world tour. Once the jobs were over, we made an agreement not to tour anymore! We needed to put down some roots and rules for our new family. We were aware that we were going to have to create a sense of stability from a profession where there is none.

Any work either of us did had to be truly worth the other one not working and, basically, staying at home. There is no system of using a crèche or day care in order to help an actor, who is also a parent, carry out their work. The hours are too irregular and the wages are the same. If you are in theatre, your hours shift from a basic nine-to-five to a few days of twelve hour calls, and then into a period where you'll start work at 6.30 p.m. and finish at 11 p.m. By the time our second child was born we tried, as much as possible, to juggle our opportunities for work between us. We have both turned away from work that we wanted to do because we knew that the other's opportunity was more important.

In the past, like many actors, we found that some of the work we had been offered looked at the world with an ignorant eye, and was best avoided, while, at other times, we jumped through hoops to chase the smallest chance of being involved in a project, only to have the opportunity disappear.

The best way to navigate all of this has been to remain very focused on what we want. We have been together for over thirty years and, in that time, we have learned to create the work we seek to accomplish. This is especially true for Lolita, as a writer. Every job is hard won and offers us the possibility of a better place in the industry, which could lead to a greater sense of security for future work but, sometimes, we have had to put the stability of our children ahead of our personal ambitions. I have often taken something closer to home where I could see the family more regularly. I know Lolita has done the same. Our principles as parents have no doubt cost us money, but at least they have left us with peace of mind, so far . . .

**Adrian Lester CBE is an award-winning actor, director and writer. *Adrian Lester and Lolita Chakrabarti: A Working Diary* is available on Methuen Drama.**

# RAISING FILMS

## Dr So Mayer

When, in 2015, *Raising Films* was formed as a community and as a campaign for parents and carers in the UK screen industries, we had a clear aim: to make parents and carers visible and audible throughout the industry. In 2020-21, we have seen just how high the stakes are for incorporating caregiving and work – yet we have also seen how far there is to go before employers, contractors and the government understand and respect caregiving.

As we reported in our COVID-19 study '*Back from the Brink*', across the board in the UK, severely disabled people (37%) and parents and carers (39%) were most at risk of redundancy during the 2020 COVID-19 restrictions (Citizens Advice Bureau), while mothers were 47% more likely than fathers to have lost their jobs, or to have resigned from their jobs, and they were 14% more likely to have been furloughed (Mayor of London's Office). This has exacerbated existing inequalities at the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and disability.

Yet the majority of research into the impact of COVID-19 on work focuses on people in permanent employment, rather than those who are in precarious labour. *Raising Films*' 2016 survey, '*Making It Possible*', showed that parents and carers in the screen industries are twice as likely as non-parents and carers to be freelancers – and people working across the screen industries are already twice as likely to freelance as those in other industries. As our sister organisation, *Parents in Performing Arts*, reported, 80% of respondents to their 2020 COVID-19 survey were

wholly or partly self-employed, with many failing to qualify for SEISS, frequently due to maternity leave, which is why *Raising Films*' current survey takes a close and urgent look at '*How We Work Now*'.

As Adrian Lester's piece reflects and details so carefully, when we think and research about working parents and carers in the screen and cultural sectors, we are looking at what it means to be freelance, often facing unlawful employment legislation and practices, as reported by Dr. Tamsyn Dent in our 2017 study, '*Raising Our Game*'. These are exacerbated by legislative issues, such as the extraordinary cost of childcare in the UK compared to the cost in most other European countries; the lack of support for professional carers, leading to the formation of the worker and migrant-led *Nanny Solidarity Network*, the UK's first nanny union; the inability of freelancers to declare childcare as a tax-deductible expense; and a broken benefits system that, among other punitive issues, militates against freelancers taking short-term contracts.

At their best, freelancing and being self-employed provide the freedom and agency that are compelling to parents and carers, particularly where creative work is concerned. In order that freedom and agency be available to all, substantive support mechanisms such as an HR hub are needed (Creative Industries PEC). What we've learned from our community is that the best practices are already happening, across so many families and workplaces: we just need to amplify them, which is why we have centred interviews and testimonials since Day One, even though 79% of parents and carers told us that their caregiving responsibilities had a negative impact on their work in the screen industries. As Lester's and Chakrabarti's story exemplifies, even though parents are out there '*Making It Possible*', it could certainly be made easier.





BOOK REVIEW

# The DARING LIFE and DANGEROUS TIMES of EVE ADAMS

by  
Jonathan  
Ned Katz

Review by  
Siobhán McGuirk

**Although February is the officially designated UK LGBT+ History Month, June is recognised worldwide as the month of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) Pride. The date is significant: June 28 marks the anniversary of the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall Inn, and of the first Christopher Street Liberation Day March that commemorated it the following year.**

Those events, half a century ago, were forthright assertions of trans and queer rights; of our community's humanity and refusal to be surveilled and brutalised by the state and society. Similar struggles continue today, all over the world. Meanwhile, a commodified, corporatized and de-politicised sense of Pride has meant that police forces and immigration agencies now sport rainbow-covered logos for one month each summer, even as they continue to harass LGBTQ people year-round.

*The Daring Life and Dangerous Times of Eve Adams* is a welcome intervention into this scene and delivers a potent reminder that queer liberation has always been intertwined with other struggles: for the rights of immigrants, women, ethnic and racial minorities, workers, all marginalised peoples. In focusing attentively on an individual who has largely been overlooked in the history books to date, the author Jonathan Ned Katz also underscores how all of the aforementioned struggles have been propelled forward by countless unrecognised and under-appreciated figures, whose lives undoubtedly merit attention. His book marks an important corrective to a common recurrence.

## Finding Eve

Born in Russian Empire-controlled Poland in 1891, Chawa Zloczewer (a.k.a. Eve Adams, among variations of both names) was a working-class, single Jewish woman who emigrated to the United States in 1912. After a few years of factory work, Eve joined up with the socialists, anarchists and bohemians of Greenwich Village and became a saleswoman of radical publications, before later running tea rooms in Chicago and New York.

Her friends and associates, including Emma Goldman and Ben Reitman, were at the forefront of a "sex-love" revolution that, despite naturalising heterosexuality, challenged dominant ideas about monogamy, procreation, and desire. Against this backdrop, Eve's own daring counter-cultural

sustain an effective balance of reverence and foreboding throughout.

Elsewhere, his nuanced and sometimes elaborate portraits of the supporting cast flesh out the bones of a story that is pieced together from a fragmented archive. By getting to know the many and varied people who left indelible marks on Eve – whether they crossed paths for fleeting moments or remained intertwined for decades – Katz constructs an affectionate, and ultimately affecting, image of a potential everyday icon.

The author's skill and experience as a historian comes to the fore in his scene-setting passages and in his asides, which are almost always relevant. His deep knowledge of LGBTQ history and culture is further highlighted by astute readings between the lines

**As Katz notes in his convincing and layered analysis of Adams' "groundbreaking" and "troublemaking" work, Lesbian Love "paved the way" towards greater acceptance of gay and lesbian lives.**

ideas and activities had the scope to flourish – placing her firmly on the radar of US authorities who were out to quash "deviants" and dissidents of any stripe.

Katz weaves a complex picture of a complex woman, set against a richly textured canvas of the multiple and overlapping 'dangerous times' in which Eve lived. While the threats that she encountered are clearly discussed, Katz manages to

and dissections of the euphemisms, slurs, encodings and selective omissions found buried in the varied set of correspondences, courtroom transcripts and newspaper clippings he cites.

It is, however, impossible to disguise the obvious difficulty Katz has faced in amassing sources, and his need to draw upon unreliable narrators (Eve included) is keenly felt. It is a challenge

Katz manoeuvres ably by carefully noting his own and others' speculations and alternative possibilities, and his refusal to attribute particular qualities to relationships without supporting evidence.

The cumulative effect is to highlight how histories of people who were marginalised or persecuted in their own times are frequently omitted, erased or distorted in the archive – and therefore demand judicious review. Katz's own painstaking work has, over five decades, helped us to (re)construct and expand that archive, and this book is another welcome addition to it, not least because it includes the full text of Adam's own publication, *Lesbian Love*.

Given Eve's intersecting subjectivities – most keenly her class, religion, politics, and immigrant status – is it also painfully clear why her work has been so unfairly overlooked. In namechecking Adams' celebrated near-contemporaries Gale Wilhelm, Radclyffe Hall and Lillian Helman, Katz underscores the classed, racialised and otherwise uneven ways in which some people become icons while others fade from view.

For a project that intends to restore prominence to a name that had previously been relegated to footnotes, it is therefore jarring that Eve's work is not the centrepiece it could and should have been. The decision to include *Lesbian Love* in the 'Appendix' that follows Katz's biography feels counter-productive, at best. While not solving this politically inconsistent editorial choice, I suggest that readers turn to it between Chapters 8 and 9. Doing so brings Eve, and her

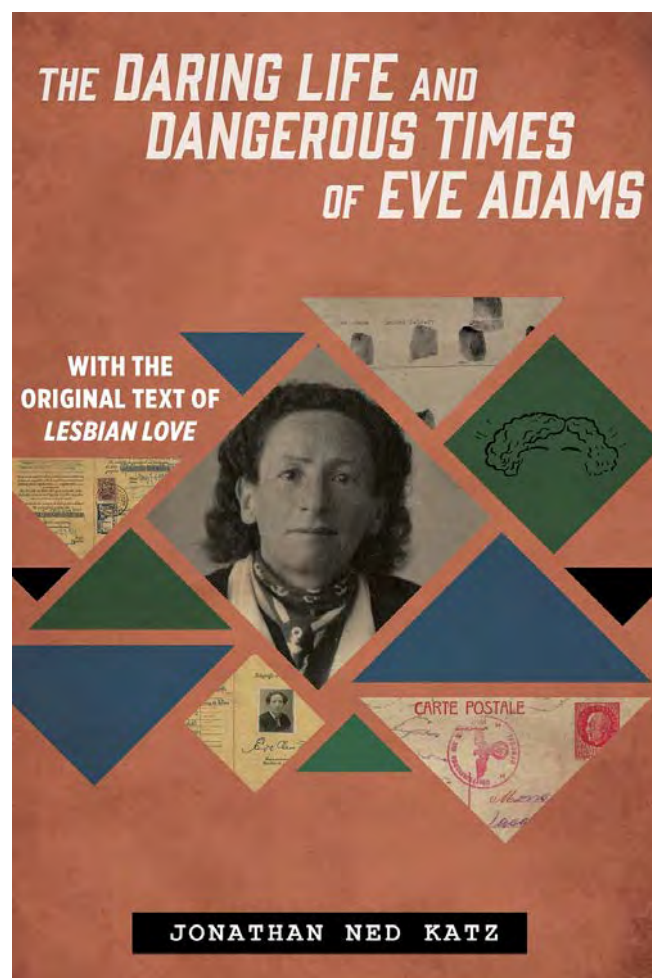
biographer's portrait of her, more fully to life.

## The bigger picture

As his title implies, however, Katz has not only focused on Eve. His book is also explicitly concerned with detailing and exposing the knotted ways in which the powerful conspire to maintain and tighten their grip on society. The deportation hearing that opens the book is, for example, carefully exposed as having been prompted and justified by a confluence of dangerous forces: state agencies' crusades against multiple spectral threats; the fragile masculinity and petty jealousies of aspirational men; and the simple greed of real estate brokers.

Later, as fascism spreads across Europe, we find Eve cornered by poverty and xenophobia, while being imperilled by virulent antisemitism. Here, Katz does not hesitate to name the "respectable" high society lesbians whose names are already writ large in the annals – Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney – and who would have shunned (or worse) a Jewish, working-class, unabashedly sexual woman, like Eve.

As Katz makes clear in his Introduction, his researching and writing of this book was compelled in part by the presence of Donald J. Trump in the White House and the far-right forces that were amassing under the long shadow he cast. While there are, of course, parallels to be drawn between the "dangerous times" of Eve Adams and today, it would, however, be short-sighted to associate the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist



norms that have long structured US society with only its latest ideologue.

Thankfully, Katz elaborates on his initial framing in the Epilogue, where he offers readers a forceful and compelling argument for continuing to fight – in Eve's spirit – for a radically more just world. His sense of anger and urgency over the alternative is palpable throughout, with a closing rallying cry that will reverberate among all who continue to fight for an inclusive, anti-capitalist and anti-racist, queer liberation.

Siobhán McGuirk is an anthropologist at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is the co-editor of *Asylum for Sale: Profit and Protest in the Migration Industry* (PM Press, 2020). *The Daring Life and Dangerous Times of Eve Adams* by Jonathan Ned Katz is out now on Chicago Review Press.



# The Audience of Our

# Capacity for Skin

**Selina Nwulu**

# I What does it Matter?

**“...you don’t worry about dirt in the garden because it belongs in the garden, but the moment you see dirt in the bedroom you have to do something about it because it symbolically doesn’t belong there. And what you do with dirt in the bedroom is to cleanse it, you sweep it out, you restore order, you police boundaries, you know the hard and fast boundaries around what belongs and what doesn’t. Inside/Outside. Cultured/Uncivilised. Barbarous/Cultivated, and so on.”**

Stuart Hall discussing anthropologist Mary Douglas and her ‘matter out of place’ theory.<sup>1</sup>

I remember an empty seat next to me on a crowded train, my breath a plague. I remember walking easy in a quaint French village before being interrupted by the wrinkled nose of a passerby; *tu viens d’où, alors?* reminding me that foreign follows me like an old cloak lugging around my neck. I remember the breeze in Kerry’s voice telling me, *I don’t like the really dark Black people, but you’re alright*, the way horror grew in my chest like ivy that day (its leaves have still not withered). I remember Year 6, the way my teacher shuddered at a picture of my profile. How I first understood revulsion without knowing its name, tucking my lips into themselves to make them smaller, if only for a little while. I remember the pointing, questions of whether I could read whilst holding a book, being looked at too intently to be thought beautiful but blushing all the same. I think this is a love, but the kind we have been warned to run from. It owns a gun, yet will not speak of its terror; obsessive in every curl of my hair, the bloom of my nose, the peaks and troughs of my breath. I’d tell you who I am, but you do not ask for my voice. You’ve already made up your mind, haven’t you?

# II Hostile, a definition:

Bitter;

windrush citizen: here until your skin is no longer needed

Cold;

migrants sleeping rough will be deported

Militant;

charter flights, expulsion as a brutal secret in handcuffs

Unwilling;

women charged for giving birth after the trafficking, after the rape

Malicious;

Yarl’s Wood is locking away too many hearts, will not let them heal

Warlike;

landlords, doctors, teachers conscripted for border control

Argumentative;

hard Brexit, soft Brexit, Brexit means Brexit

**Standoffish;**

do not fall in love with the wrong passport

Resentful;

Black and Brown forced to prove their right to free health care

Unwelcoming;

the number of refugees dying to reach you

Afraid;

Afraid;

Afraid;

how long must we make a case for migration? recount the times it has carried this country on its neck so this nation could bask in the glory of its so called greatness? how loud should we chant our stories of beauty of struggle of grit? write all the ways we are lovely and useful across our faces before we become a hymn sheet singing of desperation? what time left to find a favourite café and a hand to hold? to lie on the grass in the park and spot clouds whose shapes remind us of the things we’ve lost? the souvenirs we can’t get back?

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf>



## III

## Who are we to one another: a dirty secret

Here's the thing we forget as we age; we're not so different. Yes, there are some people whose clothes will never start a riot, those who will never know the grief of having a face made synonymous with a thug (the trauma of this deserves its own word). It is true that the things we experience are wrapped up in the life we are given. But when it comes to who we are, down to our most intimate core, aren't we all just a bit lonely, a little scared? Asking questions no one truly has answers for?

Consider this; many of us did not want to get up this morning, some of us couldn't. There is that dazed place we all inhabit seconds before fully waking that has no border, needs no passport. When the temperature drops to a chill, a body becomes its own shelter, shoulders round into a cave protecting itself. Some of our worse fears will come true, others won't. We are all still chewing on words we wish we'd said to someone, somewhere, and longing to swallow back the ones we've said in temper. A first love will make our bodies speak languages we didn't know we were fluent in and we all carry the heaviness of loss. How did we forget that we're all deeply connected on some level? Revealed only in moments like when a stranger falls ill in public; the way most of us will flock to help them, to remember ourselves.

Every day my computer scrolls through a news feed of angry people drunk on their ability to put others *back in their place*. There is a growing army of the righteous who tell us that there is a correct language to speak, an exact way to love, one acceptable altar to pray on. I watch a video of a man on the top deck of a bus screaming at another with a boiled kettle rage. He is all fist, spit in your face, *my-grand-dad-didn't-win-the-war-so-your-kind-could-piss-it-all-away*. I'm not sure it matters who the person on the receiving end of this rage is. In the video he is a chilling quiet, the kind many people of colour will recognise. It is a calculated silence, the kind where you are bargaining for your survival (and this too needs its own word). It does not matter whether he has a job he works hard at, the taxes he does or does not pay, if he tips generously, whether he is kind. That's the point, isn't it? Racism does not look for nuance, only the audacity of our skin. I wonder if with a different lens these two could be lovers, could be sitting next to each other as strangers on the same top deck. They'd realise they were listening to the same music and how this one track makes them each feel a particular kind of giddy as the bass drops, how as the bus jolts a headphone would fall from each ear and they would turn to look at each other and they would smile.

**Give us back our tongues and we'll give you an answer. It may not be a sound you'll recognise but it will be ours, all ours.**

## III

## What words have been left for us?

Words tell lies. This is difficult pill to swallow for a writer, but it is true, I think. We've inherited childish terms that shape the way we interact with one another. The words *Black* and *White* are at their heart nonsensical, artificially packed with history and, all too often, too much meaning. And yet, still, these labels are seared onto our backs. You'll find this no better than in the language of terrorism, filled with a cruel rage reserved for people of colour, whilst the more noble and redemptive words, such as *lone wolf* and *misunderstood*, for white acts of violence. How we ourselves are living in a language that equates our colour to a shipwreck where all hope is lost. It is, after all, a *dark time*. Blackness, with all its pain and apparent innate knowledge of rap and knife crime and squalor embedded under its skin, stands with its back to whiteness, which in turn, knows fresh air and the best schools to get into. How boring this, but these terms of reference are as scorched in our minds as a national anthem. How then, should we come to understand ourselves with the language we've been given? To find meaning and truth in words that are the scraps of the dictionary?

*The Audacity of Our Skin* is a version of a commissioned piece by Counterpoints Arts, originally entitled *Who Are We*, as part of a festival with Tate Exchange in 2018.



# REPRESENTOLOGY RECOMMENDS





**Ciaran Thapar**, youth worker and author of *Cut Short: Youth Violence, Loss and Hope in the City*, chooses five things for you to read, watch and listen to.

## Read

**Poor by Caleb Femi (2020)**

An anatomy of a south London neighbourhood, expertly explored through poetry and photography.

**The Last Shot: City Streets, Basketball Dreams by Darcy Frey (1994)**

Thrilling account chronicling a year in the lives of four Brooklyn college basketball players.

**Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime by Dan Hancox (2018)**

Grime's pairing of 'beats and bars' set against the backdrop of political and social change in the capital.

**Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire (1968)**

A critique of the relationship between teacher, student and society, helping us to understand sources of oppression.

**Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity by Katherine Boo (2012)**

An intimate look at life in Annawadi during an era of globalization and inequality.

## Watch

**The Wire (2002)**

David Simon's celebrated Baltimore crime drama shines a light on institutional failure and corruption.

**This is Us (2016)**

Television series written by Dan Fogelman using flashbacks to inspect intergenerational family dynamics.

**When They See Us (2019)**

Ava DuVernay's miniseries looking at the 1989 case of the falsely-accused Central Park Five.

**Capernaum (2018)**

Lebanese film, directed by Nadine Labaki, following a 12 year old boy, Zain El Hajj, navigating the streets of Beirut.

**Rewind 4Ever: The History of UK Garage (2013)**

Documentary directed by Alex Lawton charting Garage culture's progression from house parties to the club scene.

## Listen

**Philosophy Bites**

Long-running series interrogating the history of ideas with contemporary philosophers.

**Longform podcast**

Interviews helping to uncover ways of storytelling in news journalism.

**Three Pounds In My Pocket**

Kavita Puri's BBC Radio 4 oral history of Asian migration to Britain from the 1950s onwards.

**Changes with Annie MacManus**

DJ Annie Mac chats to guests about the biggest changes they've faced in their lives.

**Have You Heard George's Podcast?**

George The Poet's reflections innovatively fuse together soundscape and social commentary.

Ciaran Thapar is a writer, youth worker, and founder of **RoadWorks**. His book *Cut Short: Youth Violence, Loss and Hope in the City* is out now on Viking.



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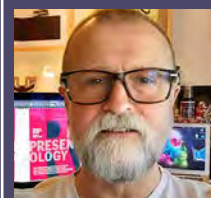
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**Commissioned academic pieces** should be between 4000 and 8000 words

If we are interested in your pitch, we will contact you. Our editorial team is small, and it may take up to a month to receive a reply. Unfortunately, we are unable to reply to every submission. If you do not hear from us within a month, please assume that we have decided not to pursue your proposal this time. That does not mean we don't want to hear from you again in the future.

Articles are read on the understanding that they are solely submitted to **Representology**. Published articles will receive a modest honorarium.

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