

ISAAC JULIEN RIOT



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With Cynthia Rose at 89 Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury, London, 1994.

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Opposite: Photo-booth self-portrait with my friends
Mark Banks and Suresh Singh, 1979. 2 x 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (5.1 x 4 cm)

Writing a book of this kind—where the research requires looking back at events, feelings, ideas, faces, songs, artworks, and friends, sometimes for the first time in years; where the writing requires resisting nostalgia and subjecting everything to critical inquiry; where part of the process is to work out what came first and what led to what—it’s natural enough to begin wondering how very nearly things might have been different. Had my parents’ flat not burnt down when I was in my teens, would I have been exposed to art at that young age? Had I not met people like Noreen MacDowell, Jenny Fortune, and my art teachers at school, would I have learned to take photographs and then make films? Had there been no riots in England in the early ’80s, would film collectives like Sankofa Film and Video have been possible? Perhaps there would have been other means, other opportunities, and other routes, but I doubt they would have been as interesting, intense, and rich as those early encounters provided.

Closer to the present, things are clearer, and it’s easier to see where thanks are due.

First, I have Glenn Lowry to thank for supporting *Ten Thousand Waves* ever since he saw the work at the Sydney Biennale in 2010. Without him and the support of MoMA’s curatorial and exhibitions teams, led by Sabine Breitwieser and Martin Hartung, I would not have the honor of presenting the work at the Museum.

A long-time friend, colleague, and participant in this book’s New York chapter, David Frankel in MoMA’s Department of Publications gave crucial early support to the idea of accompanying the exhibition with a book. When the book my studio proposed turned out to be an unusual one for the Museum, David responded with even more encouragement. His stewardship of the project from the beginning has helped make this book as good as we all knew it could be. Thanks are also due to Chris Hudson, Matthew Pimm, and their colleagues in Publications for supporting significant last-minute changes to the book.

Although all of the book’s writers are important thinkers, curators, and academics, and as such my lifeblood, they were primarily asked to contribute because they have all had critical input into my work, more than they probably ever knew. For their critical insights in this book and earlier I am eternally thankful to Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, B. Ruby Rich, bell hooks, Mark Nash, Giuliana Bruno, Christine Van Assche, Laura Mulvey, and Stuart Hall. As well as writing fantastic essays for the book, they are all actors in the story it tells. Their work and friendship over the past thirty years has been crucial to shaping not just the book but the events described.

An archival project with visual material spanning several decades, themes, and formats is a special challenge for designers. Niall Sweeney and Nigel Truswell from Pony, with whom I have had the pleasure of making some fantastic books over the past ten years, deserve special credit for taking all of this in their stride, not to mention numerous last-minute changes. They are in many ways responsible for the beautifully designed book before you.

Much of this material is collected in the archive of the Isaac Julien Studio, with significant contributions from my personal collection, production documentation, and my work. The archive is continually being developed, and is evolving to become a significant historical resource, not only for my work but in the wider contexts explored in this publication. I have the following to thank for their kind permission in letting me reproduce their images: Lyle Ashton-Harris, Brook Dillon, Sunil Gupta, John Hewitt, The Roach Family Support Committee, John Riddy, Sir John Soane’s Museum, Nigel Spalding, Steve Pyke, Mark Nash, and Steve White. Paul Ingram and his technically gifted team at ActTwo-Um were especially helpful in reproducing these images to the highest quality possible.

A project of this kind has many inceptions before a final idea is settled on and executed. I would like to thank Mark Sealy at Autograph ABP and The Arts Council for help in providing seed funding, and Ann Tanenbaum for help with an earlier proposed book on *Looking for Langston*.

While *Riot* looks back at the last thirty years of my life and career, it is published to accompany MoMA’s acquisition and exhibition of *Ten Thousand Waves*. The following people and institutions deserve special thanks once again for their support on that project: Udo and Annette Brandhorst, Helga De Alvear, Maggie Cheung, Mark Coetzee, Sam Dwyer, Huang Fan, Jan Faull, Adam Finch, Yang Fudong, Mustafa Goksel, Thorsten Henn, Virginia Ibbot, Linda Pace Foundation, LUMA Foundation, Simon Kirby, Colin MacCabe, Nonna Materkova, Victoria Miro, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Roslyn and Tony Oxley, Hsia-Hung Pai, Almine Rech, Nadja Romain, Stephanie Rosenthal, Beatrix Ruf, Libby Savill, ShangART, Tilda Swinton, Maggie Still, Zhao Tao, Glenn Scott Wright, Jochen Zeitz, and all of the production crew.

Since the premiere of *Ten Thousand Waves*, ART AV’s Tom Cullen and Nick Joyce have worked tirelessly with my studio’s exhibitions team, Molly Taylor, Elly Hawley, and Vicki Thornton, to ensure the consistent installation of the work in a number of venues all over the world.

Riot is forward-looking as well as retrospective: its writing has been much shaped by work conducted on my new project *PLAYTIME*. At the time of writing that project is not yet complete, but I am already grateful to the following people for their time, comments, and contributions: Mercedes Cabral, Ron Clark of the industrious Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Studies Program, Simon De Pury, Adam Finch, Mark Fisher, James Franco, Rania Gaafar, Candida Gertler, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, David Harvey, Nina Kellgren, Diane Henry Lepart, Colin MacCabe, Jean Matthee, Hakan Palsson, Tina Pawlik and Bertie Berkeley, Lisa Perez, Irit Rogoff, Stephanie Rosenthal, Jean-Louis Schuller, Gillian Slovo, Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson, Sarah Thornton, and the students of Goldsmiths’s Visual Cultures Department.

For their support through these and all of my projects, I am grateful to my galleries for their continued commitment, generosity, and kindness: Victoria Miro Gallery, London; Metro Pictures, New York; Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid; Almine Rech Gallery, Paris; Galerie Ron Mandos, Amsterdam; Gallery Nara Roesler, São Paulo, and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

My studio team has worked on *Riot* for over a year; it is their perseverance that has made this publication possible. They are: John Bloomfield, Studio Researcher; Mel Francis, Studio Archivist; Dora Stewart Szego, Studio Researcher; Charlie Godet Thomas, Studio Archivist; and Vicki Thornton, Studio Coordinator. Without their special and meticulous attention to detail, this book would not have been possible. I want to thank them for their amazing commitment.

Special thanks are reserved for Cynthia Rose and her partner Steve Sampson. Cynthia sat with me over many hours, days, weeks, and months conducting interviews and helping write my part of the book. Her patience, skill, and dear friendship helped make these long hours of work as fun and rewarding as any moment covered in the book.

I want to thank my mother, Rosemary Julien, for her love and support through everything. Finally, Mark Nash, curator, critic, film theorist, and my lifelong partner, has influenced how I make art for nearly thirty years now. Without his wisdom, insight, and collaboration, there would be much less of the work that is discussed in this book.

Thank you all—

Isaac Julien

Isaac Julien is a prominent member of the group of artists who have transformed film and video in recent decades, taking film from the movie theater into the museum or gallery, the home of video art, and video from a defiantly alternative medium to an art form of high production values and rich spectacle, rather like the movies. This multilevel fusion has in turn transformed the once quiet museum gallery into a space of movement and light. Julien has been in the forefront of these changes, and amid a generation of striking innovators his work has a particular fascination and strength, combining political commitment, an acute sensitivity to the complexities of the world’s developing global culture, and a visual approach that is lushly, swimmingly sensual. Although his films, photographic works, and the enveloping multiscreen video installations for which he is now best known emerge from no-holds-barred processes of research and analysis, they appeal not just to the mind but to the body, delighting the eye.

This is true of none of Julien’s art more than *Ten Thousand Waves*, his most elaborate installation so far. First shown in the Biennale of Sydney in 2010—a revelatory experience for those who saw it there—it has now come to MoMA, where we are extremely proud to present it in the fall of 2013 as a work in the Museum’s collection. Set partly in England, mostly in China, *Ten Thousand Waves* combines myth, history both cinematic and social, and current realities of labor and migration in a story that the viewer puts together by following complementary video images spread across nine separate screens and accompanied by intricately orchestrated sound. Arranged somewhat differently wherever it has been shown, *Ten Thousand Waves* will be installed at MoMA in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium, where the height of the space has allowed Julien to experiment in unprecedented ways with the work’s possibilities as an encompassing environment.

This book is in its own way as fresh as Julien’s work. When the Museum began this project, a beautiful publication on *Ten Thousand Waves* had already been produced, and there seemed little purpose in so soon creating a second one. Julien therefore proposed, and we eagerly agreed, that to accompany the show we might work with him on a book he had for some time been thinking about writing, a kind of professional autobiography—the artist’s own account of his aesthetic and intellectual development. Complementing his chapters are essays by a distinguished group of observers of and participants in the successive stages of Julien’s career, on which they provide their own perspectives. The result is quite unlike a traditional exhibition catalogue, and we are delighted to have had the opportunity to publish it.

We are always so grateful to those who help us to stage the Museum’s exhibitions and other programs, and the exhibition of *Ten Thousand Waves* is supported by Mickey Straus, The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art, with additional funding from the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund. I am no less grateful to the staff who so skillfully produce such extraordinary programs, and here a particular mention must be made of the crew that handled the considerable technical challenges of Julien’s installation of moving images and sound. The final thanks must go to the artist himself, who, while already a good part of the way through making his ambitious next work, to be titled *PLAYTIME*, has absorbed himself in bringing *Ten Thousand Waves* to The Museum of Modern Art.

—Glenn D. Lowry

Director, The Museum of Modern Art



FIRE



FIRE

My exposure to art dates back to my early teens in London. It came about through an unexpected combination: events that happened, people I met, and things I was seeking.

I was the eldest child of five and both my father and my mother worked nights, so I had to look after all my brothers and sisters. My early existence was very much connected to that, and to reading and studying. Looking back, I think I've always had a double sense of myself. Maybe this was because my parents, who were from Saint Lucia, spoke French Creole to one another but would only speak to the rest of us in English, even though I could understand everything they were saying. I distinctly remember being at a party when I was very young—maybe five or six—and overhearing people say, “*Gadé sé petit gason kon on makoumè*” (Look at that effeminate boy!). When you have a sense of language where people talk about you and you're not meant to understand—and yet you do—you start to read life very differently. Certainly that affected my understanding of things; I felt that what people say is never what they mean, that language and being each has its hidden, contradictory sense.

If I see a photograph of myself from around this time, it seems to me a picture of someone who's looking at things from a much older position. Because in my world I had to mature very quickly, there was never much chance of me remaining naïve.

Early on there were two central goals in my mind: I didn't want to live the life of my parents, nor did I want—ever—to work in a factory or a bank. I was very determined about it; there were things I wanted to do and things I didn't want to do. I think this was a lot about not being heterosexual, but I could also see what working in those environments did. What really started to change things for me was my O-level art class.¹ There I had a set of extraordinary teachers—people whose conversations opened up a brand-new world. I had one teacher, for instance, who always went to Marseille in the summers and who would talk about how people, artists, lived there. Another influential teacher was Mr. Price who, during life drawing, started explaining dialectical materialism.

This was my first encounter with the idea of middle-classness. All my teachers were middle-class and they were also of the left. So we were having these conversations about Marx, about Trotsky, about socialism—all while I was drawing and painting and making sculptures.

I initially grew up on the Coventry Cross Estate, a fairly

Preceding spread: Isaac Julien. *Undressing Icons*. 1990–99. Chromogenic color print, 15 3/4 x 23 in. (39 x 58.5 cm). Performance view, Edge 90 Biennale of Performance Art, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1990. The series documents the performance *Undressing Icons (Looking for Langston)*, which took place in London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1990 and in Minneapolis in 1991. It consisted of *tableaux vivants* in places around each city, where the spectator encountered reenactments from the film *Looking for Langston* (1989). The performances were made as a response to the experiences of censorship that I had during the making of the film. **Opposite:** Isaac Julien. *Paradise Omeros*. 2002. Still from three-screen installation, 16mm color film, video transfer, sound, 18 min. 51 sec. Left, Gaby Agis, my former pas-de-deux partner at the London Youth Dance Theatre. **Below, top to bottom:** photo-booth self-portrait, 1979. Saint Lucia Tourist Board. *Belles in native costume*. St. Lucia B.W.I. 1950s. Postcards.





notorious housing development in London's East End where by the time I was ten, practically everyone I knew had already been arrested. I didn't quite understand this but I could clearly see that between black boys and the police there was always some kind of *encounter*. I was very aware the police were not around to protect me. My school—which was then called the Daneford School for Boys—sat between Brick Lane and the Hoxton area. Now this is a center for the London art world, but during those years it was a political battleground. There had been a local wave of Asian immigration and young Bengali kids were just starting to enter schools. So things were politically charged, with street gangs and vigilante groups—all those sorts of things. Hoxton itself was a stronghold of the far-right National Front political party. This made it a serious no-go area for any black person. Briefly, violence was part of my daily experience; it was just another part of my going to school.

This went on until 1975, when there was a serious fire in our home—an event that ended up changing my life. Of course my parents were really upset, because we had to move. But I was completely happy, because we were leaving a place where I was always being harassed. Where I was called “secretary boy” because I bothered to study, because I was making a clear choice to be different. We moved to another estate—I was out of Coventry Cross. The block we moved into was nicer, plus it was on the estate's edge, facing out. Across the street I could see a little terrace, a row of Victorian two-up, two-down houses.²

For me, our moving house started to transform everything. This began with a building right around the corner—an East End landmark called Kingsley Hall. It's a very important building, one linked to the Suffragettes, to the General Strike of 1926, to the area's whole history of left-wing politics. In the '30s, Mahatma Gandhi once stayed in it, and during the '60s, R. D. Laing had practiced there. It was through the Hall that I met a woman named Jenny Fortune.

I encountered Jenny through a summer mural project, something she had launched in tribute to the Suffragettes. Jenny was campaigning to make the Hall a community center and right away, she introduced me to a lot of people. Some of them brought me into their photography, others into their filmmaking—all things at that time being done in collectives. This workshop system, which had developed out of the hippie counterculture, was based on representing not just working-class people but also their rights. More specifically, in our neighborhood, it was connected with the political group Big Flame. This was a revolutionary socialist organization in which Jenny played an active role.³

After meeting Jenny, I entered a different universe. On the one hand, there were all the things happening at Kingsley Hall. Then directly across the street was the terrace we all knew as the “Acme Houses.” These were overseen by an artist-led charity that had turned them into artist housing and studios. I was very curious about those houses, so I started trying to befriend the people in them.

Thanks to that, I encountered another oppositional culture. I remember once just walking into one house where an artist was giving a performance. Retrospectively I think it may have been Stuart Brisley, but he was in a bath, it was all completely black . . . and I remember thinking, “God, these white people are strange. What on earth are they up to?” At the same time, I wanted to know more.



Essentially I was bored, and I was also quite lonely. I wanted to make connections and I knew these people were interesting.

I also discovered there were lots of people near me making film—people like Noreen MacDowell, Alan Hayling, and Joy Chamberlain, all working in the Newsreel film collective. Through Jenny Fortune, too, I met a German political fugitive by the name of Anna. Although I had no idea at the time, this was really Astrid Proll, who had been part of the Baader-Meinhof gang.⁴ Both Jenny and Astrid had a definite influence over me. So did a woman called Susan Shearer—Susan owned a darkroom and she started to teach me photography. At the time, all I did was try to photograph my surroundings. But right away I liked how the camera was technical. Putting the film in, having to have a light meter, printing in the darkroom—I relished all of that. Through Susan, I also met the people at Camerawork, another local collective engaged in photography.

This bohemian culture turned out to be quite artistically interesting. Take Alan Hayling, who later worked at Channel Four, at the Mentorn Media film production company, and at BBC Documentaries. Although Alan was very much a part of Newsreel, both he and Susan worked at the same Ford plant as my dad. So my introduction to all this new culture was dissident; its art was all formed in opposition to establishment politics. This is one of the reasons why the role of today's East End as an art-world headquarters seems so uncanny to me. When I was growing up there, artists also led the dialogues, but back then, they did it while trying to remake and re-create real connections between art and life and politics. Even if they didn't offer public art as such, one knew the public was always part of their discourse.

Then, as we know, council housing and similar ways of housing oneself started to disappear. Property, as a means of investment, became the ultimate fetish—it turned into the dominant means of securing one's position. In the East End today, the privatization of public space is an obvious and defining feature of art's presence. It's largely the privatization of both the art world and that real estate, hand in hand, that has succeeded in redefining those geographies. My East End, where I grew up and where I was familiarized with the making of art, has vanished. It's been replaced by a new, branded contemporary art—one whose deepest connections are to the market and to Mayfair. But in its original form, before artists like Rachel Whiteread and Tim Noble and Sue Webster and the Chapman brothers defined it, there was another East End. It was defined by different artistic ambitions and its “art world” never tried to define itself against the local.

I certainly don't want to pretend that I'm outside of those changes. After all, as a kid, I dreamed my neighborhood would be gentrified. If a club like Shoreditch House had existed when I was growing up, I would have been in there like a shot. But on the flip side, now we have the Shard.⁵ That represents the presence of capital in the city, it symbolizes the wealth that created all this modernity. Yet it's all about the fact that while you are able to look at it, or you might be able to visit, you can never really inhabit the inside.

My own formation in the East End was very different. For me, just trying to learn was difficult, requiring the day-to-day negotiation of local boundaries. Learning was also punctuated by powerful news from elsewhere,



Opposite, top to bottom: photo-booth self-portrait with the artist David Harrison, Saint Martins Alternative Fashion Show, 1981. Photo-booth self-portraits with Josephine McNally, a friend from Saint Martins, 1980. **This page, top to bottom:** (Left to right) Joseph Julien, my father (deceased), me aged 4, and Rosemary Julien, my mother, with my brother Jeffrey Julien (deceased). London, 1964: still from *Paradise Omeros*.



of things like the 1976 uprisings in Soweto. I clearly remember being terrified by newspaper photos showing South African school kids being shot. It was images such as those that made me see how young black people were represented. That was something I recognized before I learned to articulate it.

Closer to home, we had our own oppositional organizations: there was Rock Against Racism, Big Flame, the Anti-Nazi League, the International Marxist Group (IMG), and the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). Most of these arose in the mid-'70s, around the time of punk rock—and as with punk, most were very middle-class groupings. I myself preferred the more anarchistic groups, and the East End saw a lot of circling around the Trotskyists. But I flirted with any organization that seemed interested in me, even when I knew it was just for expedient reasons. At one point my mum went completely ballistic about all this. That was in 1976, when the WRP was knocking on our door each day.⁶

By 1977 I was passionate about dance. So I trained for two years in the London Youth Dance Theatre. We performed at Queen Elizabeth Hall and Sadler's Wells, but I also went to see experimental groups—companies like Rosemary Butcher and Extemporary Dance. I met Gaby Agis too; she was my pas de deux partner. Gaby went on to work with people like Michael Clark and become a proponent of collaborative performance.

I also felt an abstract link to dance and performance. The way I've extrapolated those two things in my work is to think about them in relation to the body, to the use of nonactors and to the mise en scène that gets created by a camera. In works like *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Three* (1999), and *Western Union: small boats* (2007), there's a direct correlation with both choreography and performance. All of that stems from my first, teenage interest in dance. But it also comes out of the later disco culture—that was another thing that helped me take my early dance interests into a more theatrical, conceptual arena.

The other big thing for me during the disco '70s was, of course, the questioning of my sexuality. One benefit of growing up when I did was that I could see many possibilities, many identities, that weren't simply heterosexual. One had the hippy cultures and one had the left. But I also had pop culture, and in pop culture—in music, certainly—there were many more forms of identification on offer. One had Marc Bolan, one had David Bowie, and one had all the androgynous aspects of glam rock. At the same time, there was the whole evolution and development of gay culture. Of course, it wasn't exactly developing where I lived! But my first encounters with it did come through school, through a few friends who, as it turned out, were mostly gay. From my art teachers, too, there was a slightly more liberal approach. Nevertheless, at my school, the only time that I could come out—in any way at all—was after O-levels, when most of my class left but I stayed on.

By the time I was sixteen, I was going out to a nightclub in Essex called Lacy Ladies. It was a hard place to get into, because there was a color bar. The only way you could get around this was if you went with white friends, and I already had a few of those. But the door policy also took in how you dressed. How you looked was evaluated, and as I came to understand that, it made a deep impression. One had to dress in a particular style.



Opposite, top to bottom: Anti-Nazi League poster, *The National Front is a Nazi Front*, 1978. *Stop Mary Whitehouse* poster, 1978. My Sex Pistols concert tickets, 1976. Below: with Ray, a Saint Martins friend, "jumbling"—visiting jumble or garage sales, 1981. Bottom, left to right: with record, c. 1980; on Chelmsford Road, Walthamstow, 1978; on Kings Road, London, 1979.



Even though I couldn't afford to buy anything from them, after 1976 my friends and I went to the boutique Seditionaries. Equally, we later haunted Antony Price together.⁷ Those fashions would quickly permeate the mainstream, but at the time, they were underground, and we reveled in our styles; we enjoyed the status and the tribelike nature of beings who could recognize one other by how we dressed—as well as by our connection to sounds and to dance. We considered the mainstream and the rest "naff" . . . truly unstylish. The appreciation of music mattered as much to us as it did to our elders. But it mattered in a sense that was our own.

At eighteen, I left secondary school, and I more or less spent a whole year clubbing. A lot of that time was spent at the Embassy Club in Old Bond Street, which was a bit like London's Studio 54. There I was able to check out people like Bryan Ferry and Bianca Jagger. Andy Warhol very often used to appear in that nightclub and just being around him was rather curious. It gave me clues that between pop culture and my own experience there might actually be some possibilities. I even remember thinking that—in a way—a part of me wanted to be like Warhol. Warhol was a key because, with him, one had both the life-style and the art.

Of course I couldn't actually afford to go to the Embassy Club. The way I managed that was, on weekends I would haunt the East London jumble sales and "antique fairs." Then I would head to the King's Road and sell whatever I'd found. I sold my finds at two places, Antiquarius and 20th Century Box.⁸ I also used to buy secondhand clothes from Seditionaries so I could start assembling a wardrobe of my own. All this had a certain entrepreneurial aspect, in that I could look at the clothes stylish people were wearing, and could read magazines like *Vogue* and go into certain shops, and then assimilate that into a very similar look. In strict fashion terms it was a kind of "passing," but it was also a punk-derived DIY.

One night at the Embassy Club there was a performance piece that restaged the siege of the Iranian Embassy in 1980.⁹ The real thing had involved terrorists, hostages, and the army, but in the Embassy version, it was the dance floor that got stormed and it was the singer Marilyn who was rescued. The next day, all this made the front page of *Newsline*. The general idea in that piece was, "These decadent upper-class types were all mocking this terrible moment." It really went on about



how low and vile that was. I remember thinking, “Well, I was there, I saw that, and I go to that club.” It made me think about the whole idea of trespassing: a trespassing between club culture, politics, and one’s sexual identity. I started thinking about that as something both quite dangerous and very attractive. I felt sure that as an artist, I wanted access to that energy.

I was already convinced I wanted to go to art school, so I did a pre-foundation course at City & East London College. That was when I made my first real video, called *How Gays Are Stereotyped in the Media*. I’d love to see that video now, because what I did was cut out models and pages from *Gay Left* magazine, then add an analysis of the gay subtext in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948). I remember one teacher said it would be more “interesting” if I had talked a bit more about being black and gay. Well, those facts would take me a lot longer to address. They took around nine years to be able to articulate, starting with *Territories* (1984), then *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (1987), and finally *Looking for Langston*.

As far as my own identity, being between different groups—gay disco culture, black soulboy culture, and white middle-class activist culture—was sometimes a painful and difficult way to exist. I had friends and I was able to exert a certain invention, which I could manage with a certain style. But although I became fairly fluid and cosmopolitan, most other people tended to stay in their separate groups. Internally, also, negotiating all those different movements and allegiances was hardly simple. So I remember thinking, “I’m being interpreted by so many different factions; how can all my identities ever cohere?” In fact this was something that was not so easily managed; it took time to attain my own position.

For instance, I’ve always been interested in the art part of fashion and in self-styling. By itself, gay culture was sometimes insufficient for that. Because some parts of it remained quite normative and almost bland... . let’s just say they were conventional. When you went out to a gay club, for instance, you would never hear James Brown—you would not hear hard funk. The music was never quite as good as at those mixed or straight venues where I also went.

Still, the more identities one could have, I felt, the more interesting. I liked the idea of having a gay identity because it was different from merely having a black identity.

I never, ever viewed being gay as disadvantageous. I just saw it as enriching to my life. But one of the things I had to slowly acknowledge was the very real existence of gay racism.

It was through the fusion of club culture, fashion, and music—and through those early meetings with Jenny Fortune and Astrid Proll—that I started to figure out some basic artistic correlations. This was also spurred by coming more into Central London and especially into Bloomsbury, where I would later make my home. I first came at age sixteen, to visit the bookshop Gay’s the Word. There, from the moment I steeled myself to walk in the door, I found that left culture and gay politics were crystallized. This was the first place I found the kinds of writing I treasure, articles like “In Defence of Disco” by Richard Dyer. Now, that shop is just around the corner from my home, and it’s been there thirty years.

In terms of desire, much of my art remains concerned with those early questions and conflicts. In one sense, of course, it’s all about art, and it always has been. But the serious art world has sometimes conceived of me as an outsider. Maybe that’s why I retain such a concern with theory, and with making arguments that connect to debates in that realm. Certainly I’ve never just been interested in art for art’s sake. But my work does have a schism and a confrontation: it has things that are “high art,” experimental and modernist, but at the same time it retains my political focus.



endnotes

1. In English schools at the time, students took a set of exams called O-levels (ordinary levels), usually at the age of sixteen, that determined the nature of their continuing education. These were followed by a second set of exams, A-levels (advanced levels), usually taken at the age of eighteen and important for entrance to university and further education. A-levels were the gateway to middle-classness, and where I grew up, to do them was the exception.
2. Row houses with two rooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs (and an outside privy) were a feature of Victorian working-class architecture.
3. Descended from Italy’s Lotta Continua group, Big Flame began in 1970 at Liverpool’s Halewood Ford plant. In London, it took root at the Ford plant in Dagenham.
4. I always knew Astrid as “Anna Puttuick.” Along with several others I met, she worked at Lesney’s toy factory in Homerton. They produced Matchbox model cars.
5. Renzo Piano’s seventy-two-story luxury housing, office, and hotel complex is at the time of writing the United Kingdom’s tallest building.
6. To counteract the right-wing *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, the WRP had its own daily paper, *Newsline*. Every day, they would drop this off at our home.
7. Seditious (formerly sex) was Malcom McLaren’s and Vivienne Westwood’s King’s Road boutique; Antony Price designs were initially found at Plaza, but after 1979, he opened his own shop, also on the King’s Road.
8. Retail landmarks from a post-’60s King’s Road, Antiquarius and 20th Century Box bought and sold antiques. Antiquarius was a market comprising numerous separate dealers. Its building is currently occupied by the American chain Anthropologie.
9. From April 30 to May 5 1980, six men took twenty-six people hostage in London’s Iranian Embassy, on the south side of Hyde Park. After one hostage was killed, the government sent an elite Special Forces unit to storm the embassy and end the siege. This they did, but not without deaths of both captors and captives.

Opposite, left to right: *Gay Left* magazine no. 9, 1979. *Black Music* magazine, May 1977. Above: Isaac Julien. *Before Paradise*. 2002. Pigment ink prints, triptych, each: 39% x 39% in. (100 x 100 cm).



RIOT

Preceding spread, left to right: Rod Iverson and Hugh Williams, two Saint Martins film students, and me during the filming of *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), just before the camera crew was harassed by Stoke Newington police.

This page: Polaroids taken on the set of *Young Soul Rebels*, 1991. At bottom right in the photo at bottom right is Nina Kellgren, director of photography on *Young Soul Rebels*, *Looking for Langston* (1989), and many other projects of mine.

Opposite, top to bottom: "Pull a Muscle," photo spread showing me with Joey Attawia, i-D magazine no. 6, August 1981 (the "Sex & sweat is best" issue). "Young Soul Rebels" article in *Interview* magazine, January 1992, showing me with Sophie Okonedo. With friends, 1980, including on my right Mark Banks. Mark and many of the others in this photo have sadly since passed away.



RIOT



When I arrived at Saint Martins School of Art, in 1980, punk rock was still very much in the air. Everyone knew Saint Martins was where the Sex Pistols had played their first concert, in 1975. Of course I'd grown up with music as an important cultural expression. But I was very into the language of punk—by which I mean the movement's dress and its political posture. For me, the real point of punk was its DIY attitude: the principle that anyone could make, complete, and benefit from a homemade thing. Also, with relationship to dress and to styling, punk championed amalgamating elements that normally never went together. All that, of course, resonated with Saint Martins students. Back then, the influence of club cultures was dominant on the art of almost everyone at the school.¹

Through London's weekly pop music papers we knew all about the punk trajectory in the States. But there was a cultural difference between our U.K.-U.S. worlds that I think derived from English politics. For me, the importance of punk came from the Sex Pistols' intervention in the Silver Jubilee and from the ways punk used Situationism.² Of course, for its sounds alone, the movement had a broad appeal. But as much as I liked the dissidence of the music, it wasn't something I would ever really dance to.

Early on, I had identified myself as a soulboy. Basically, this meant you were interested in funk music and you got involved in buying specific import records—records that were quite expensive, so you had to really save up for them. Those commodities helped you to create a relationship to the culture of black America, and also, in a sense, to wider black representations. These were very significant things, because where I actually lived the landscape was so barren.

Somehow, in England, this also meant you weren't in the past. It denoted something about the advancement of black cultures, something that was being represented through the music. So, from early on, collecting albums was important. Being able to own them, being able to play them—that formed a central part of one's new identity. A new identity that, through going to clubs such as Lacy Ladies, Global Village, and the 100 Club, became more pronounced.

The ways in which we were able to congregate were important. From the mid-'70s, we had this younger group of people trying to fashion themselves in their own modern manner, one that was opposed to the fashionings taking place around reggae. Most of my fellow art



This page, top to bottom: with the milliners Paul Bernstock and Thelma Speirs before an evening at the Kinky Gerlinky club night where I met Hanif Kureishi, 1991; David Harrison on the Bow Bridge Estate; David's performance at the Saint Martins Alternative Fashion show, 1981. Opposite, top to bottom: front cover of *The Observer*, September 29, 1985. My camera crew and I are harassed by Stoke Newington police during the filming of *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, 1983. To my right, Rod Iverson of the London Media Research Group.



students, of course, were involved in post-punk music. So they didn't really understand what these import sounds and their culture meant. Yet to me, that whole kind of relationship to America, and especially to black America, was exciting. It had its own kind of futuristic aspect, like "This is what black people might be in the future." Also, I think my love of dance and movement actually comes from James Brown. Certainly it came from the idea that when you're dancing, then you really mean something. You're *producing* meaning, both in movement and in that core response to musicality—in all its tonal, atonal, and rhythmic aspects.

There's a way in which, when I started making works of my own, I was always comparing those works to records. Even now, when I make a piece, I feel I'm making a record. All the works have to be hits—which is to say they have to work in a particular manner and in a particular way. I've always seen myself as working from this kind of position. For me, rhythm is really, really central to the creation of structure. After all, a central reconciliation of funk is its sense that there's no conflict between beauty and politics. Funk manages to contain both things in one—and that's where I think what I do relates to music. I feel my work is a translation of that same impulse into a different arena.

When I started at Saint Martins, I could count the other black students there on one hand. Every time I entered the doors, I was stopped and made to show my pass; every day, I had to prove I belonged there. Outside of that, however, my foundation course was a hoot. I already knew a lot of people who did fashion, people such as Paul Bernstock and Dencil Williams.³ I soon met others, like Hamish Bowles, Peter Doig, and David Harrison.⁴ I also met Sacha Craddock, who would go on to write and curate, and I met a lot of painting students through David Harrison. David actually lived not far from me; I had often seen him walking on our estate with his pink poodle, and I'd always wanted to find out who he was, so one day I followed him from the East End right up to Saint Martins. David's best mate was John Galliano, so we three used to hang out together. My first Super 8 film, *Portrait of the Artist David Harrison* (1980), featured David and his poodle.

To subsidize my studies, however, I needed to have a job. So I became a dresser in the West End production of *Evita*, at the Prince Edward Theatre in Old Compton Street. Because I had become preoccupied with Super 8 film, this led me into making a piece called *The Dresser* (1980). But the *Evita* job was interesting on its own terms too, just because of all the synchronization in the show. Through selling secondhand clothes, I already had a relation to fabric, and from dance, I knew a bit about the backstage life. But it was through *Evita* that I learned about major-league orchestration. That taught me a great deal about how big projects are structured and about how a whole series of events needs to happen. It also gave me some insight into the psyches of actors. Really, it was a bit like being the eldest child again—having responsibilities and learning not to be intimidated by taking charge. That was something vital that I learned outside of the college.

During my second year at Saint Martins, we had the Brixton riots. That was the biggest event in my new life, those riots. I had already seen their prototype during Notting Hill Carnival. Every summer Carnival took place in this emotional moment, one that was always situated between pleasure and danger. Because its displays were



threatening, this became a regular confrontation through ritual. Yet at the same time, it was extremely exciting and it gave you license to express yourself in the daylight. Rather than tucked away in the dark, you were on a public stage. There, I came to see how violent disturbances could seem like new ways of articulating a self.

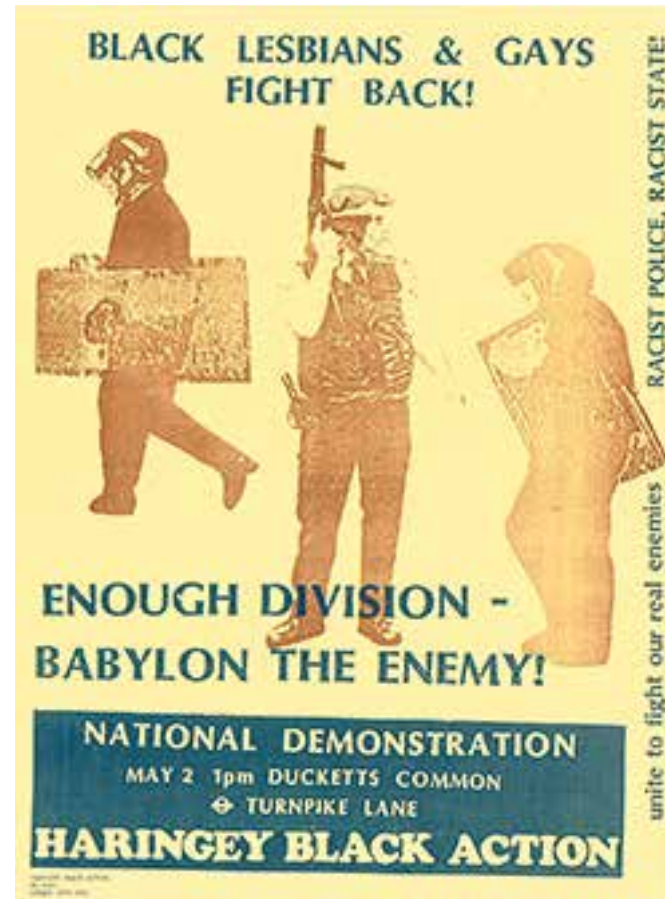
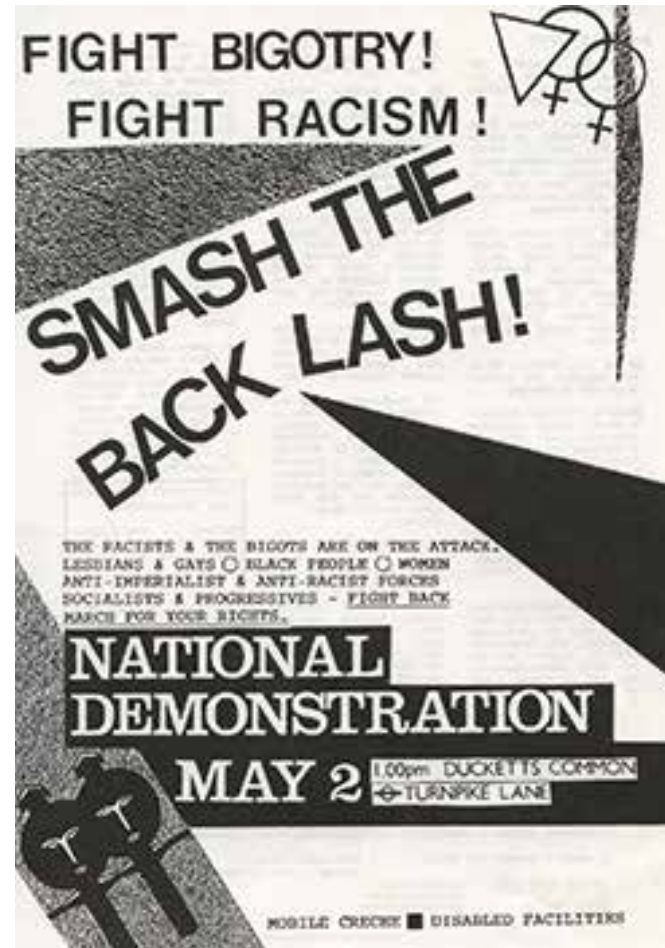
Once things got out of hand, however, there was anarchy. In all the uprisings and eruptions of the 1980s I saw that kind of powerful, dissident energy over and over. It was like Carnival had forecast the whole year of riots in 1981: Brixton, London; Handsworth, Birmingham; Chapeltown, Leeds; Toxteth, Liverpool; and Sheffield. This sort of anger is something very important, in fact it's been a driving aspect of my making work. But at that time in my life—and for the first time—I was finally getting a chance to reflect on what I was making.

It was then that I made the choice to do Fine Art/Film at Saint Martins. So the spring of '81 also marked my first encounters with experimental film, which I first saw as very exclusive, very elitist—right away, I regarded it as a language that excluded me. Nevertheless, I was fascinated by its painterly aspects. The other thing I found attractive about it was more political: those works broke down preconceptions of what "film" should be.

Of course the riots had an effect on every young black person. For us, the immediate consequence was that all black artists were suddenly lumped together, we were all seen in the same frame of reference. In the groups we went on to form, like Sankofa Film and Video, all of us were caught up in that nebulous working position: either you had to think about making work of a respondent nature or you made works that could define you outside of all that. At least, those were the two main kinds of response. There was also a third, however, which was to work against the grain of all the expectations, lest they foreclose your autonomy as an artist.

The riots did force the hand of some institutions, which had to come up with the will to forge new domains. In these, for the first time, certain questions could be posed. After that, it was all about how one might choose to frame those questions. It became entirely a matter of one's own versioning and one's vision.

The most interesting question for me proved to be: what did black artists actually want to say? What would their art look like if its internal dialogues were made accessible to a wider audience? *Looking for Langston*



Opposite, top to bottom: *Smash the Back Lash!* demonstration leaflet, 1985. Haringey Black Action poster, 1985. The Sankofa Film and Video Collective, left to right: Martina Attilie, Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Maureen Blackwood, and me. c. 1988–89. This page, top to bottom: Jack Goldstein. *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*. 1975. Still from 16mm film, color, sound, 3 min. Steve Pyke. *Derek Jarman*. 1983. Bromide print, 14 1/4 x 15 in. (37.6 x 38 cm). *ZG* magazine no. 3, 1981, with cover art by Robert Longo.



came out of just such a conversation, one connected to black gay desire and to photography. But it was really born of thinking about the textuality that belongs to the innermost life of one's consciousness. The main point was to make certain this remained the focus—and to ensure one approached the work in an artistic, poetic manner.

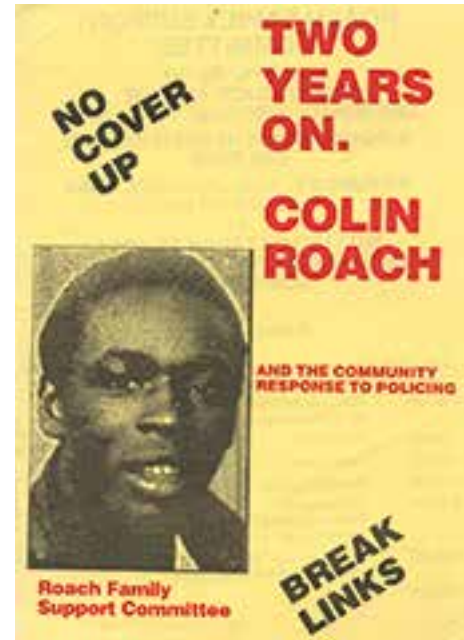
This was a different reaction to the race-relations paradigm reinforced by the riots. But for me, those riots are absolutely where pieces like *Looking for Langston* come from; I don't feel they would have been produced under "normal" circumstances. *Langston* wasn't the first work I made after them, though; that was a videotape called *Who Killed Colin Roach?*

I still think making works like *Colin Roach* was very important—partly because it was so clearly a campaigning project, yet when it was finished, in 1983, it was mostly shown side-by-side with experimental works. *Colin Roach* was usually shown in venues meant for video art. So activist tapes connected to political campaigns were seen as another side to, not just video art, but also documentary.

At the time, I was very excited by video. There were a lot of videomakers, such as Derek Jarman, who came to Saint Martins to show us work. For instance, Jack Goldstein showed his *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* loop (1975). By 1981, too, London had what critics called the "New Romantic Cinema"—very baroque and homoerotic Super 8 films being made by people like Cerith Wyn Evans and John Maybury. These were featured in *A Certain Sensibility*, the first real show of its kind, at the ICA in 1981. At the time, I myself was going clubbing at Le Beat Route on Greek Street, I'd come across a great text on the riots in *ZG* magazine, and I was discovering the work of Félix Guattari.⁵ Some of this would end up closer to home than I realized at the time: the author of that *ZG* piece, published under the byline "Pablo," was Paul Gilroy, who would become a long-term friend and colleague. Paul's text was conceptually quite close to theoretical texts I'd been reading, but his voice felt closer to mine in that he was describing what was happening in the streets of London, and reflecting my own feelings about the body politic both during and since those early riots in Britain. Not just Paul, though, but all of this seemed tremendously exciting, because I was discovering a discourse that was already happening.

I also got involved in a black gay discussion group that included people like the writer Kobena Mercer. Within this we had our own Foucauldian reading group, where we started looking into the family and at social welfare. This was because, in social services, we had discovered another line of attack—one where psychiatry was being applied to pathologize and vilify black sexualities. That discussion group developed a strong affiliation with what would later become postcolonial studies. This gave us a language with which to contest established models, patterns we saw as racist, outmoded, and Eurocentric. More important, it really helped to create debates—debates able to reach beyond the binarism that, at least to me, seemed to surround all black subjects. I felt like one could finally avoid all the antique moralisms. One had more freedom to seek subtleties and make discoveries.

This was a time when politics were literally all around me. For example, I stumbled into the story of *Who Killed Colin Roach?*: I was coming out of an East End jumble sale one Saturday when a march passed by protesting a death in police custody. It turned out that Colin Roach, the young black man in question, had lived quite near my home.



Above: flyers for a rally in Hackney, London, in 1983 calling for an inquiry into the death of Colin Roach, and for the Roach Family Support Committee. Right: *The Voice*, "London's First Black Newspaper," with the headline "Colin's Father Cleared," June 4, 1983. Colin's father, James Roach, had been arrested during a protest march. Below and opposite: Isaac Julien. *Who Killed Colin Roach?* 1983. Stills from U-matic video, color, sound, 34 min. 42 sec. Opposite, top: Roy Cornwall (later DOP on *Territories*) is harassed by police; opposite, center: the parents of Colin Roach.

Which meant, of course, that Mrs. Roach could have been my mother, that his family could easily have been my own. This took me back to the radical workshops of my teens and the whole idea of the camera as a street weapon. So I wanted to make a work that would embody dual perspectives. One of these would be inside the black families' reactions to this death. The other would show responses to black community organizers. I insisted that my camera be engaged in the politics, so it was positioned very deliberately opposite the traditional media. This was at a time when video was still finding its language, when video art was still somewhat undefined. Yet I was determined to appropriate those early video-art techniques to make my campaign tape. I wanted to utilize this camera taken out of an art school context and repurpose its technology for the street. I wanted to redirect the gaze of the ruling media. My real aim was to turn that gaze on the police, because, in *Colin Roach*, they are the people rioting.

That piece, in one way, was very much a local response, but it was also meant to contest some things I was being taught. Specifically, it was in reply to a tutor who had told me, "Isaac, no working-class person will understand these films." Of course my works back then were just experimental films, scratches on film, really—and they were indeed quite arty. So part of me had been forced to think, Well . . . maybe she's right.

Colin Roach, however, was my demonstration against her view. It was made to say, "I can do the same work as you and I can tell a tale. But I can also make quite experimental things." That came from a very typical kind of student rebellion, but also because I myself felt driven—specially since, by the time *Who Killed Colin Roach?* was done, I was being approached by Channel 4 television.

This was the moment when we founded Sankofa Film and Video.⁶ Going into 1982, I had received a visit from Nadine Marsh-Edwards, a student at Goldsmiths College. She'd heard that there was a black student doing film at Saint Martins, so she came along to find out what I was up to. That little visit was really the start of everything; before long, with Robert Crusz, Martina Attile, and Maureen Blackwood, we were running off to meetings with Channel 4, the ACTT (an industry union), and the Greater London Council for the Arts.⁷

This was the first time I encountered the term "ethnic minorities." I had never, ever thought about myself in those kinds of terms. But at the GLC, you had both the "celebration of difference" and its standardization.

When it came to organizing, because of my history with workshops such as Newsreel, I already understood a lot of the ways one needed to think. I had absorbed the concept of collectives, I knew what they were and I understood how you went about forming one. I was also acquainted with the people who handled funding. Usually they were white; certainly they were middle-class; and always they thought of themselves as politically liberal. I understood that whole culture because through Noreen MacDowell, Jenny Fortune, and Astrid Proll, I'd already been engaged with it.

That's why I joined the ACTT, as a sound recordist: once you were a member you could form a workshop, and that's how you became entitled to apply for grants. There was a whole process, a mixture of public and private funding, but one requirement was "an integrated practice." This meant you had to provide training, give workshops, and conduct seminars. In Sankofa we embarked on doing





Above: members of Sankofa filming during a demonstration in Brixton against the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984, a controversial bill that granted the police considerable extra powers: Maureen Blackwood (holding boom), me (holding headphones), and Robert Crusz (holding camera). **Opposite, top to bottom:** with Sankofa member Martina Attile and the film historian Jim Pines, 1987; Sankofa member Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Nina Kellgren, and a crew member in the Sankofa office in Bloomsbury, 1985; Martina Attile in the Sankofa office, 1985.



all of those, but we disliked them and never really did them well. However, one of the things that developed out of the program, out of that notion of an integrated practice, was an agenda of films to make over five years. We were required to construct a remit for that amount of time.

So Sankofa's formation was always a strategy—but I think it was also a game. It was a game in which we all participated, or at least I participated while *knowing* it was a strategy. I don't think I ever took it all completely seriously—too much of it was ticking boxes to get at money. Yet the ethos behind it was connected to the community. In the wake of the riots, there had been a genuine acknowledgment that voices were excluded. Then real platforms were provided for their representation. People would identify and seek out those different communities: black people, Asians, women, gays and lesbians. All this led to a large number of collectives and workshops, groups such as Ceddo, Cinema Action, ReTake, and, up in the North of England, Amber.⁸

The name we took for our own, Sankofa, comes from a Ghanaian proverb. That name was given to us by Kobena Mercer, and our logo became a bird flying into the future with its head turned back—our acknowledgment of the past and of history. This also had associations with Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History," the meditations he had drawn from Paul Klee's 1920 watercolor *Angelus Novus*.

I think I saw myself, in Sankofa Film and Video, as one member of an artistic avant-garde. But back then, there were a lot of avant-gardes; there were a lot of different, equally interesting groups. That's how I first met Jimmy Somerville, for instance, because he was involved in a gay video collective.⁹ That was a lesbian and gay teenagers' group, mostly comprised of people involved with the club night Movements. There was Movements and, next to Kings Cross, there was the Bell, a famous gay pub where you would find people like the Pet Shop Boys, Cerith Wyn Evans, John Maybury—and Derek Jarman. There was another artistic milieu, one that mixed experimental film, politics, and pop video.

Back then, a real essentialism surrounded moving images. There was a big demarcation between film and video, between those people who saw themselves as video artists and those who insisted on seeing themselves as filmmakers. Video artists would only work on video—because to them that was the point, and they felt video constituted its own aesthetic. I was more interested in a cross-fertilization of forms. So, when I made *Territories*, in 1984, I shot on Super 8 film, put it onto video, experimented with those images, and then refiled them in 16mm. I remained keen to disband all the categories.

This was just when Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil* had been released. In that, I could see all these different aesthetic registers, such as the technical ways he was thinking about memory and how that was treated through video solarization. *Sans Soleil* radicalized how we in Sankofa were thinking, both about video and about documentary. Chris Marker's work, which took a film-essay form, had the idea of wrestling with film. But he was also wrestling with the archive. Marker was grappling with video-art effects, too, but not just to have them present in a piece. That, I think, has been my basic problem with abstract film: I feel that in formal terms, it might be radically interesting, but in terms of content, it's never radical enough.

Marker developed a formal vocabulary of his own, one that facilitates an extraordinary musicality. That's exactly



what I was also searching for; there were acoustic aspects I wanted to replicate visually. For instance, the whole idea of scratching, which had come from America, was well installed in our music vocabulary. For me this became a really central question: how could one have musicality, how is it best represented?

That association with musicality is partly what gave a rhythmic and conceptual structure to *Territories*. Of course I wanted to make a political piece about policing—about policing and also about desire. Yet after all this time, people still return to that work, and I think it's because of its rigorous conceptual aspects. One might associate them with the video art of its era, but it's something that was developed from bringing different interests together.

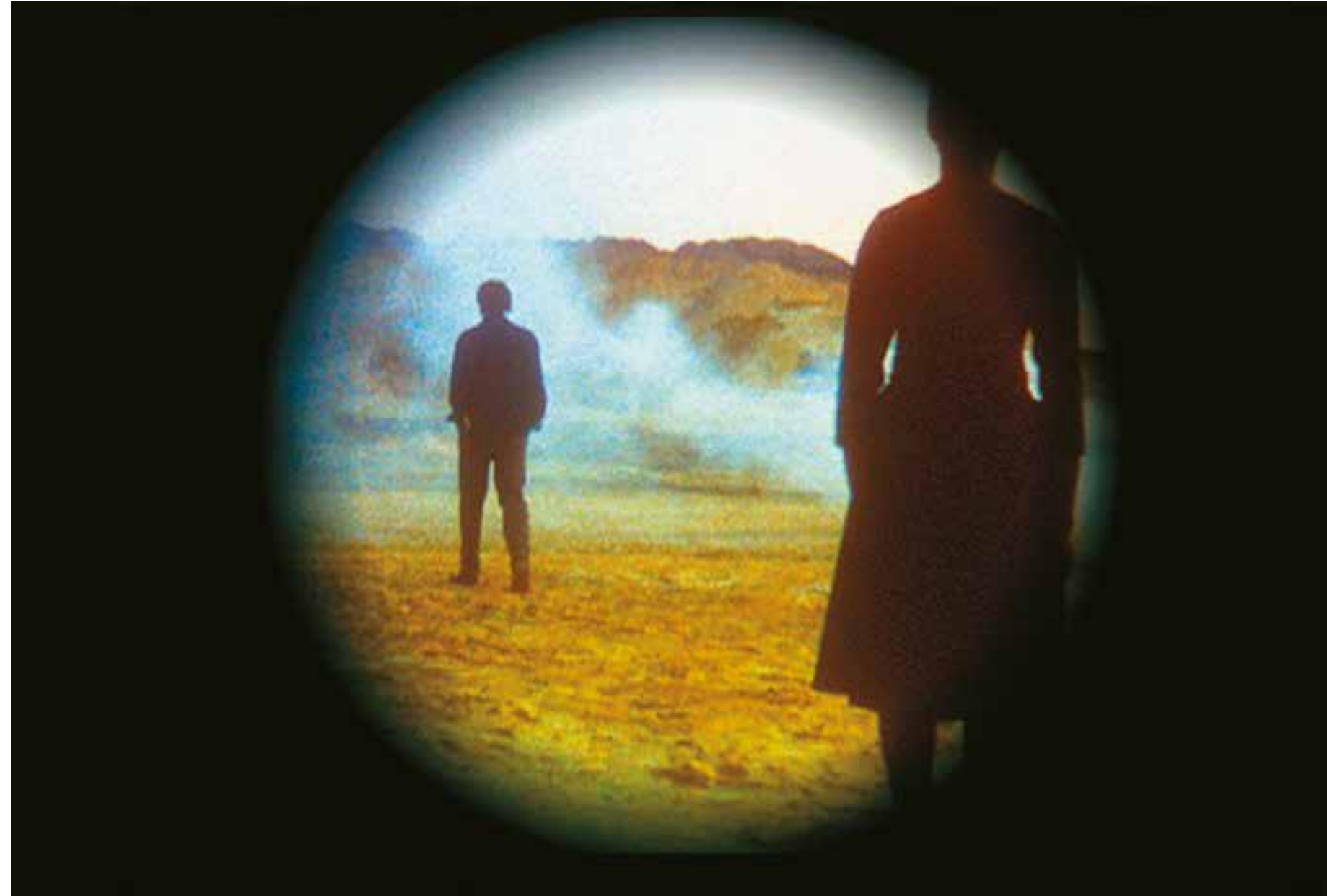
Another thing that proved provocative with *Territories* was a particular critique it received. I clearly remember the moment after I made that work, because I was offered a place at the London Film and Television School.¹⁰ People were saying, "Well, Isaac, *Who Killed Colin Roach?* was great. But *Territories*, isn't that a little too *Godardian?*" Meaning too experimental.

That's when I began to question the whole idea of what might seem most "appropriate" for the person who is black. In my hands, the poetic approach of *Territories*—its representation of black subjectivity—was suddenly somehow seen as being suspect. But in fact I was very interested in formal questions. I wanted to experiment, to create different visual auras, play with time, play within the film using factual material. I wanted to find out how things could be visually poeticized. My ultimate aim, really, was to create a style for political remembering. But works such as *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, *Territories*, and *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986)—essentially those were all responses to the riots. They were made in answer to certain fixed ways of looking. But not just ways of looking at black cultures; they were also involved with ways we might feel about ourselves.

endnotes

1. This began with the "Blitz Kids", a group of regulars such as Steve Strange (Steven Harrington) and Marilyn (Peter Robinson) at Covent Garden's Blitz Club known for their outrageous and androgynous dress, and morphed into the New Romantic movement; the Blitz Club (which closed in 1980) was not far from Saint Martins, in Covent Garden.
2. The queen's Silver Jubilee, celebrated in the summer of 1977, had gained an unexpected soundtrack in the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen." Greil Marcus gives an interesting analysis of punk and Situationism in his 1990 book *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press).
3. Paul Bernstock and Dencil Williams ran a club night, White Trash. With Thelma Speirs, Paul founded the London milliners' Bernstock Speirs.
4. Hamish Bowles went on to become international editor for *Vogue*; in Britain, both Peter Doig and David Harrison are represented by the same gallery as myself, Victoria Miro.
5. What I was reading was the *Anti-Oedipus* volume of Félix Guattari's and Gilles Deleuze's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. In 1984, Guattari's thoughts about deterritorialization would inspire my title for *Territories*.
6. The collective Sankofa Film and Video was set up in the summer of 1983 by Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Robert Cruz, Martina Attile, Maureen Blackwood, and myself.
7. This was the "cultural committee" of the Greater London Council, London's Labour-controlled governing body.
8. Amber predated the others, but received funding from the same initiatives.
9. Jimmy later founded the pop group Bronski Beat and, before his solo career, formed The Communards with Richard Coles (now ordained in the Church of England).
10. In 1984, the director of the National Film and Television School, Colin Young, offered me a place; I was the second black student ever given one. So I spent one day there. At the end of it, however, I had to turn around and tell Colin, "This just ain't for me."

Opposite: Chris Marker. *Sans Soleil*. 1983. Stills from 16mm transferred to 35mm film, color and black and white, sound, 100 min. **Below:** Isaac Julien. *Lost Boundaries*. 2003. Still from Super 8 film, color, sound, 4 min. The still shows footage of the filming of *The Passion of Remembrance*, a film produced by Sankofa in 1986; 16mm, color, sound, 95 min.





BAD TO WORSE

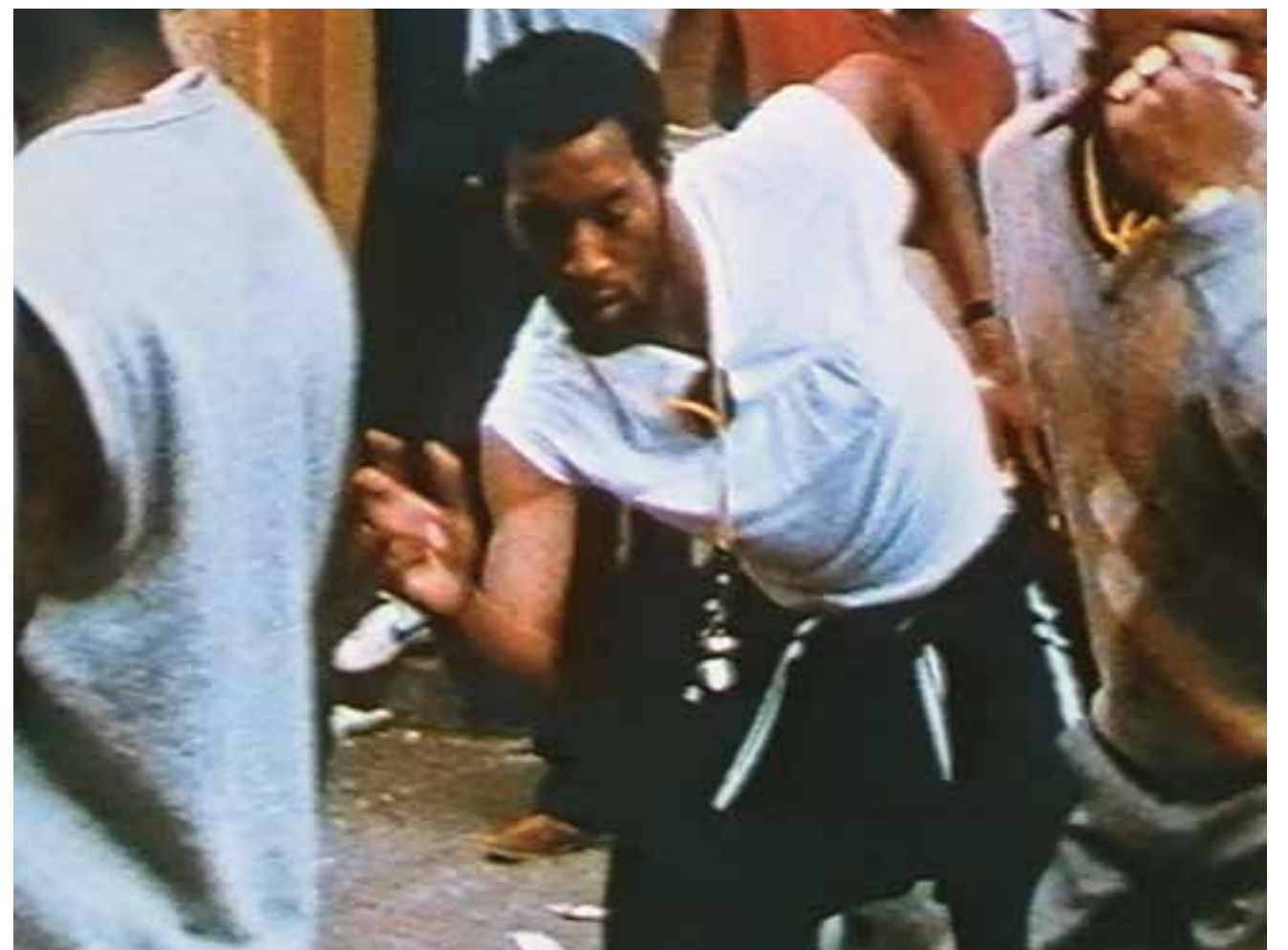
Paul Gilroy

It was rioting that first put me into contact with Isaac. The “uprisings” of 1981 were an explosive culmination of black communities’ bitter struggles against the habitual racism of Britain’s police; Isaac’s early films surveyed criticism of the criminal-justice system that had nurtured that rebellion, the context for our initial encounters. His work was supported financially, in a small but significant way, by London’s last, great radical experiment in local government: the Greater London Council, led by Ken Livingstone and abolished by Margaret Thatcher.

Remembering that period in the city’s life has become difficult not least because the neoliberal moods that hold sway these days require a disaggregation of history, which deteriorates into an undifferentiated past. If historical sensibilities reappear at all, they are likely to be no more than an aimless plethora of fragmented and firmly localized “back stories.” Since that mechanism obstructs the workings of counter-memory, the wheel of opposition has to be invented over and over again. Perhaps that is enough?

The presentation of recent disorders as unprecedented eruptions of mindless violence has made it vital to remember England’s earlier riots and to appreciate their enormous impact on the country. Mass antipolice violence centered on London’s Notting Hill carnival had begun in 1976. In 1981, rioting stretched across several months, during which the national mood became increasingly anxious and fearful. The race war once predicted by the Conservative politician Enoch Powell appeared more plausible after the scale of antipolice rioting had shifted from smoldering quotidian resentment to spectacular resistance. In 1976, in a sign of acting locally and thinking globally that would soon be routine, a young militant mob, mindful of what had been going on in the embattled schools of Apartheid South Africa, began to chant “Soweto, Soweto” at London’s bewildered and defeated police force. The same patterns were continued as dusk fell upon the West London street celebrations a year later and the bricks and bottles started to soar overhead once again to the accompaniment of Dennis Brown’s rude new cut of the Heptones’ “Equal Rights” and the sly, subaltern snarl of Culture’s “The Baldhead Bridge.” Similarly righteous demands for justice and reciprocity outside of race echoed through many confrontations with white supremacist skinheads and organized neo-fascists, leading up to the 1979 election that brought Thatcher’s combative government to power.

The rioting that continued sporadically between April and July of 1981 was rooted in young people’s particular experiences of inequality. It was also configured by a dawning sense of the chronic, intractable character of the crisis and of the unholy forces unleashed by accelerating deindustrialization of urban zones. The city of Liverpool was particularly significant because of its close links to Ireland—where a “low-intensity”



Preceding spread and opposite: Isaac Julien. *Territories*. 1984. Stills from 16mm color film, sound, 24 min. 12 sec.



Opposite, top to bottom: still from *Territories*. Still from *Who Killed Colin Roach?*



BAD TO WORSE Paul Gilroy

RIOT

Chapter 2

ISAAC JULIEN RIOT

war was underway—and the character of its black community—older than the twentieth century and less dominated by Caribbean settlers than the country's other areas of settlement. Recently released government records would eventually reveal that Thatcher's cabinet had quietly been debating the likely fate of the city if a Detroit-style strategy of "managed decline" could be adopted.

Once the flames and the adrenalin had subsided, a sense of hopelessness was pervasive, and this time there was no punk insubordination with which to mediate the fatal diagnosis of futurelessness. The 1981 arrest data show that participation in the nationwide riots was far from narrowly confined to the country's "ethnic minorities." *The Economist* trumpeted that the events demonstrated the failure of Britain's welfare-state settlement, while the *New York Times* provided a more accurate and considered interpretation of the July disturbances than was publishable in the British press at the time:

Spreading urban violence erupted in more than a dozen cities and towns across England yesterday and early today as policemen and firemen fought to control thousands of black, white and Asian youths on a spree of rioting, burning and looting. A senior Government official said that the disturbances, which came as the epidemic of violence in the dilapidated inner cities entered its second week, were the most widespread to date. In some cities, he said, "we are facing anarchy." By 5 A.M., most of the violence had been brought under control, but sirens and burglar alarms could still be heard through the streets of London, and palls of smoke rose from half a dozen districts. From Battersea and Brixton in the south to Stoke Newington in the north, and from Chiswick in the west to Walthamstow in the east, rocks and shattered glass littered at least ten multiracial neighborhoods.¹

It is now hard to judge whether those events should still be considered contemporary. Social life in Britain has moved on. Amplified by the Internet, the gaudy dreamscape of consumer culture has discovered new value in iconized diversity, and convivial interaction across the axes of class, gender, and marginality is often unremarkable. The political imagination of the rioters has contracted to the point that their diffuse assault on power brings only the transient pleasures of going shopping without money. But we must ask whether changes in the politics of race, and in the way that racism conditions both culture and politics, have been sufficient to draw a line—to create a strong sense of a before and an after. To put it another way, how are we to accommodate the spectral presence of Colin Roach, Aseta Simms, Kelso Cochrane, Cartoon Campbell,

Roger Sylvester, Joy Gardner, and Stephen Lawrence? To name just a few of those who either died at the hands of Britain's police or suffered from their repeated failure to deliver the justice on which plausible democracy relies. Is it better to think of those undead figures as emissaries, duppies from a bygone age charged with the impossible burdens of remembrance and redemption? How might the mysteries of their deaths bear witness not only to the consistency and potency of racial violence but to the possibility that we now find ourselves in a different time? In 1983, the eloquent and compelling contributions made by Benjamin Zephaniah, Neil "Mad Professor" Fraser, and Barnor Hesse to Isaac's *Who Killed Colin Roach?* aspired to that evasive possibility. The long arc of our country's chronic, multilayered crisis—economic, political, and cultural—supports the opposite conclusion: it suggests that against the movement they animated and their own best efforts and hopes, we remain stalled in the same dismal phase of our postimperial history.

The crisis has reappeared, and it is less than ever an immediate economic question, whether of agno-capitalism's global flows and ebbs, complex financial instruments, or the terminal decline in British manufacturing. Rather, this fluctuating condition, by turns melancholic, nostalgic, and anxious, encompasses profound cultural and psychological aspects. The longer historical perspective that racism always seeks to deny us directs attention toward the pathological consequences of departed empire, which are forbiddingly complex and remain to be worked through.

Today, that oversight requires engaging the morbidity of a corporate populism that is driving forward a sequence of unending civilizationist conflicts, aimed impossibly at restoring a greatness that can never be revived. This raises postcolonial and indeed racial and national issues bearing upon questions of identity and thwarted belonging, upon the recognition of difference and the persistence of racial misrecognition. Also at issue are the enduring significance of alterity and the determination to know which differences will be different enough to matter in a neoliberal era that is emphatically multicultural and enjoys a voracious appetite for exotica.

That disposition may be unexpected. It does not, of course, mean that racism is over and done with; as the whole world has become a counterinsurgency battlefield, new forms of racism have emerged. We are not yet clear exactly how digital technologies and the social and cultural relations they foster are altering the operations of human memory and cognition, but we know that they have incubated virtual and immaterial racisms and created novel repositories of racial feeling. We know that the disruption they have introduced has registered in the ebbing of Britain's once-militant postcolonial movement for justice and liberation from racial hierarchy. However, as the half-lives of Colin Roach

and the rest grow shorter, their figures can still serve as mnemonic aids that are bigger and more important even in their dupped state than the minimal information recorded in the relevant Wikipedia entries. Isaac's initial step was to try to keep Colin's death close at hand. Remembering Colin and the others who have shared his fate provided a means to affirm not a closed or fixed identity but a mode of solidarity, and the precious possibility of acting in concert against injustice and the antisocial processes with which it is bound up. The footage Isaac shot of the demonstrations demanding the truth about Colin's death remains painful to watch. It shows London as gray and harsh. Today, the police still snigger when we protest, but that reaction is less frequent. The ubiquity of cell phone cameras makes smirks and abuse more of a risk. They are usually concealed behind a mask. Contempt can be veneered by the professionalization required under the neoliberal ethos of customer care, or hidden beneath the armor of military equipment: flame-retardant clothing, balaclava-ed helmets, batons, and riot shields.

Now that governmental feminism sanctions the combat of female soldiers and the sacred institution of marriage is open to all, regardless of whom they desire, perhaps the long-denied possibility of being simultaneously both black and English has become, at the very least, a theoretical possibility. For now, neoliberal culture is comfortable with that outcome. If the traditional exclusion of blackness from Britishness has indeed been modified, we must be scrupulous in acknowledging other, related processes that unfold at slower tempos and defy the idea of linear upward progress where race and nation are concerned. Not only does our sense of time and our understanding of Britain's postcolonial history assume a different aspect when the absurd saga of black suffering is placed in the foreground, but the significance of racism in shaping the country's polity and, in particular, in strengthening the hateful but endlessly productive populist strand in its political culture becomes harder to overlook.

The war on terror took many tools from the lexicon of immigration law, and much of the hatred that is now directed at Islam draws directly on earlier racist tendencies in British politics. The rioting of summer 2011 erupted in the same locations that had been aflame three decades earlier. That recurrence alone promotes an analysis in which things can be both worse and better than they were—a change that would be sufficient to make this a different moment: a new conjuncture in which reacquaintance with *Who Killed Colin Roach?* and *Territories* becomes even more urgent and valuable.

In preparing this essay, I was surprised to be made to remember that in my preacademic life as a journalist, I had penned an enthusiastic review of the Colin Roach film when it was first released. Watching it again today,

Stills from *Who Killed Colin Roach?*





I still see it as a pointed piece of Du Bois-ian art as propaganda. It was part of a protracted community campaign that endures in today's demands for an end to residually color-coded varieties of justice and police impunity. Three decades ago, I was more shocked still to find out that Isaac had discovered some angry, anonymous words of mine and folded them into the poetic commentary that flows through *Territories* while the world-inverting history of carnival is laid out, the butcher's apron catches fire, and transgressive love combines with militant class feeling to demand a deeper democracy than Mrs. Thatcher's cohorts were prepared to countenance.

Territories invokes the Notting Hill Carnival as an already syncretized precedent for contemporary patterns of intermixture and recombination. The ludic spirits of disorderly, traditional Mas supplied dynamic new foundations for the rebel culture of the sound systems. In London, Jamaica could mesh with Trinidad and the small islands. The loud demands for dignity that resulted from their asymmetrical communion provided a double warrant: for healing and for saturnalia. But these public excesses were enacted in the blitzed, decaying postwar streets that were now home. That bleak, cold, joyless urban environment was host to the new geography of power that was being invented out of the "low-intensity" war underway close by in the six counties of Northern Ireland. That claim may seem far fetched to a contemporary audience, but it was a view held not only by leftists concerned with what we used to call "civil liberties," and the creeping corrosiveness of states of emergency, but by senior police ideologues who detected in the resistance of "second generation" black settlers an unwelcome potential for escalation to Irish levels of violent disorder. Babylon was determined to prevent the formation of "no-go areas" in which the opposition of workless, hopeless "colored school-leavers" could leaven into the out-and-out rebellion that was seen as the biocultural proclivity of slaves and their descendants.

The significance of the carnival was far greater than those problematic ethnic inclinations. In *Territories*, the growing power of organized sound and music counterpoints the visual montage and is articulated with it aesthetically. Our narrators sit at a Steenbeck editing machine, underscoring their responsibilities as mediators, but the DJs and MCs who make up People's War are not positioned at that distance. Under the time-stretching impact of what we must call a dub aesthetic—one grasping the shock that only the unintelligible can communicate—the film demands to be encountered as a remix. Its repeated phrases, oscillations, and orchestrations depart from reggae; their relocation to the gray northern metropolis has opened them to the emergent power of hip-hop and what we used to call "electro." That too is layered into the real-time revolutionary rhythms of Coxsone's Studio 1 in Jamaica.

Stills from *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, with Benjamin Zephaniah at opposite bottom.



Here is the demotic pulse of a truly populist modernism and we do “Feel Like Jumping.” Its dissident spirit is propelled by the energy of ritual repetition, of ceaseless versioning. The infrastructure, as always, is the sound of the drum, and its most insistent, compelling voice is Style Scott’s timely, machinic hybrid of funk and reggae.

The intellectual and political spirit of these exhilarating experiments must have thrived in the space between the Saint Martins art school, where Isaac had studied, and London’s black social movement against state harassment. However, I suspect that its fissile core was provided by debates in and around London’s Gay Black Group of the early 1980s—a collective of extraordinary young people whose enterprise and vision await the historians that their subsequent achievements merit. It would be putting it very mildly to say that AIDS changed the organizational priorities and strategic calculations of that political body. The epiphany of the new disease transformed everything. It worlded the local, generating new alliances and enemies, prompting new varieties of care and fear, danger and responsibility. By robbing us of so many lovely, brilliant, and insightful human beings, it produced new ways of thinking about politics and culture that could not be confined to their melancholic origins, as well as a preference for political mobilization over the work of mourning. In Isaac’s case, the demand to savor life lived against the horizon of death yielded eventually to a larger diasporic ambition in which British blackness might start—as it had done through the export of our distinctive lovers rock reggae—to work upon and expand the creative and ethical horizons of Caribbean political culture. This was the task that he would take up in his later film *The Darker Side of Black* (1994).

Territories and *Who Killed Colin Roach?* are among the best documents with which we can explain why the conflicts of the 1980s arose and why they must now be examined again. Those battles made Britain into a different kind of society—a precarious market society. The last few years have taught us that it will be a more militarized, more unequal formation, entirely beyond the reach of courageous artistic interventions of this vintage type. Just as *Territories* predicted, the novel nomos required by the new variety of control has made us all suspect, all surveilled. Now, these creative residues of the militant past, and the ghosts they conjure, offer a valuable chance to re-endow insurgent history in the regressive order to which we are in danger of becoming resigned.

Still from *Territories*.



endnotes

1. R. W. Apple, “New Riots Sweep England’s Cities; ‘Anarchy’ Feared,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1981, available online at www.nytimes.com/1981/07/11/world/new-riots-sweep-england-s-cities-anarchy-feared.html.

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