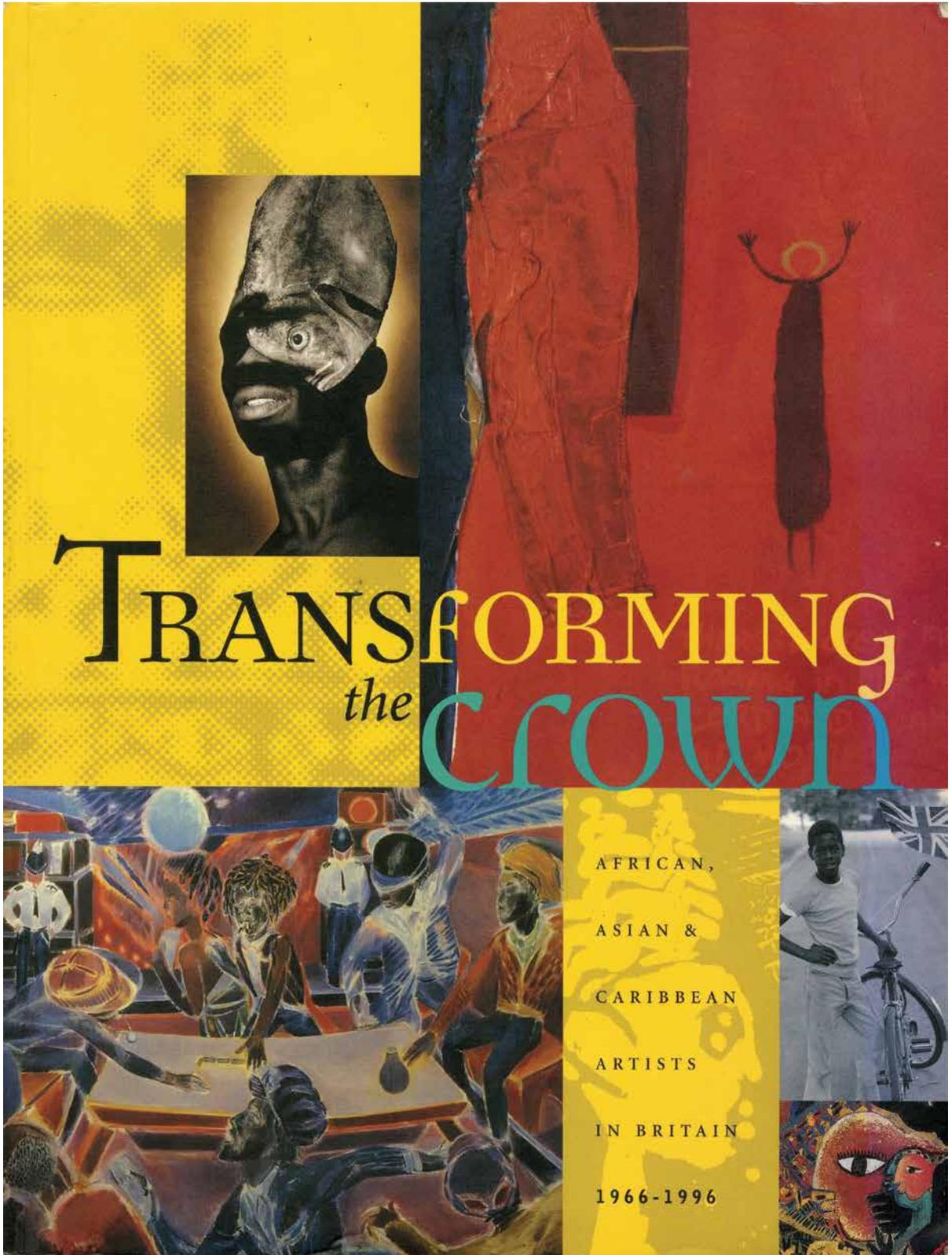


# New Directions in Black British Art History Some Considerations

Eddie Chambers

**T**ime was, or at least time might have been, when the writing or assembling of black British art histories was a relatively uncomplicated matter. Historically (and we are now perhaps able to speak of such a thing), the curating or creating of black British art histories were for the most part centered on correcting or addressing the systemic absences of such artists. This making visible of marginalized, excluded, or not widely known histories was what characterized the first substantial attempt at chronicling a black British history: the 1989–90 exhibition *The Other Story: Asian, African, and Caribbean Artists in Post-War Britain*.<sup>1</sup> Given the historical tenuousness of black artists in British art history, this endeavor was a landmark exhibition, conceived and curated by Rasheed Araeen and organized by Hayward Gallery and Southbank Centre, London. Araeen also did pretty much all of the catalogue's heavy lifting, providing its major chapters. A measure of the importance of *The Other Story* can be gauged if and when we consider that,



Catalogue cover for the exhibition *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian, and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966–1996*, presented by the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute, New York, and shown across three venues between October 14, 1997, and March 15 1998: Studio Museum in Harlem, Bronx Museum of the Arts, and Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute. Cover reproduced with the permission of Mora Beauchamp-Byrd



Poster for the exhibition *The Other Story: Asian, African, and Caribbean Artists in Post-War Britain*, Manchester City Art Gallery, May 5–June 10, 1990. Photo: Eddie Chambers

before the arrival of the exhibition at the Hayward Gallery (then touring to galleries in Wolverhampton and Manchester), there was no perceptible sense within either academia or the art world that black British artists had any sort of *history*. At the present time, Lucy Steeds, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, is undertaking fascinating and important work on revisiting the exhibition and, in part, seeing to it that this significant curatorial undertaking is introduced to generations born since the mid- to late-1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Within a decade of *The Other Story*, another curated overview of black British art history was undertaken by Mora Beauchamp-Byrd. *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966–1996* was an exhibition presented by the Caribbean Cultural Center, New York, which was shown across three venues in the city from fall 1997 to spring of the following year. Beauchamp-Byrd (who was at the time curator and director of special projects at New York’s Caribbean Cultural

Center) curated the exhibition, and hers was, like Araeën’s before it, an ambitious and comprehensive undertaking. *Transforming the Crown* brought together a large number of artists, all of whom had connections to the United Kingdom, either by birth or by residence, permanent or temporary. Refreshing, perhaps, there was little in the way of overlap between the exhibitions’ two bodies of practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

The sort of work undertaken by Steeds with respect to *The Other Story* has yet to be done for *Transforming the Crown*, though the latter is, in many respects, deserving of an equally close and fruitful reading. Apart from representing an American attention that would in time assume limited, but nevertheless important, academic dimensions, *Transforming the Crown* had the vision and presence of mind to include in its roster Yinka Shonibare, who was already on his way to taking up the dominant art-world position he went on to occupy and maintain. The exhibition’s catalogue also pointed to other important developments in black



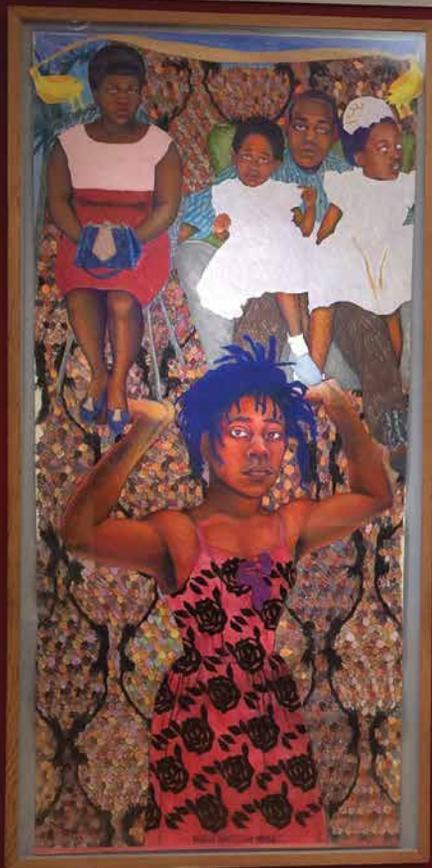
**Ronald Moody**, *The Onlooker*, 1958. Teak, 65 x 32 x 38 cm. Installation view of *The Other Story: Asian, African, and Caribbean Artists in Post-War Britain* exhibition, Cornerhouse, Manchester, May 5–June 10, 1990. Photo: Eddie Chambers

British art histories, including scholarly attention by Beauchamp-Byrd, Okwui Enwezor, Kobena Mercer, Gilane Tawadros, Anne Walmsley, Deborah Willis, and Judith Wilson, their texts copyedited by Franklin Sirmans.

In keeping with shifts in curatorial strategies, only one broad, generalized, gallery-based investigation of black British art histories has been presented since *Transforming the Crown*—London’s Guildhall Art Gallery’s 2015–16 exhibition *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960–1990*. This was a sizeable exhibition and archive project, the centerpiece of which was a six-month show that took place at Guildhall Art Gallery from July 10, 2015, to January 24, 2016.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was broad in its historical scope (its span of 1960–90 close to that of *Transforming the Crown*, which had been 1966–96). Beyond that similarity, both exhibitions presented work by familiar, as well as less familiar, names. *No Colour Bar* aligned itself to, and had a pronounced interplay with, not only the

struggles of immigrant communities in Britain, particularly during the 1960s to 1980s, but also some of the manifestations of these struggles such as black bookshop and black British publishing initiatives. Since *The Other Story*, art-world attention to individual black British practitioners and scholarship has increased exponentially, and it is this that has, necessarily and importantly, led to the emerging of expansive, deeply nuanced histories that resist easy commodification.<sup>5</sup>

Three decades after Araeen’s endeavor, however, complications abound when it comes to the writing or assembling of black British art history. The casual observer might perhaps be struck by the extent to which, within Britain, a number of the artists in the above-referenced exhibitions have been conspicuously brought into the fold of British art by way of honors awarded by Her Majesty the Queen or the bestowal of Royal Academician status by that august institution. Saleem Arif, Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Sokari Douglas Camp, Lubaina Himid, and



Left: **Sonia Boyce**, *She Ain't Holdin' Them Up, She's Holdin' On (Some English Rose)*, 1986. Crayon, chalk, pastel, and ink on paper, 218 x 99 cm.  
 Right: **Sonia Boyce**, *Rice n Peas*, 1982. Oil on canvas. Installation view of *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960–1990* exhibition, Guildhall Art Gallery, London, July 10, 2015–January 24, 2016. Courtesy Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London, 2015

Yinka Shonibare have all made a trip, or several trips, to Buckingham Palace to collect awards such as (in ascending order of status and importance) Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE), Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE), or Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE). Though it appeared that among people from an ethnic minority background accepting such honors the majority were given the MBE, David Adjaye, the architect and sometime collaborator with painter Chris Ofili, was awarded one of the supreme (male) “gongs”: a knighthood, entitling him, as a knight of the realm, to be referred to and addressed as “Sir David.” Added to the above are the not insignificant

number of names of other black British artists, photographers, filmmakers, and arts workers, upon whom honors have been similarly conferred. This ever-growing list includes John Akomfrah, David A. Bailey, Gus Casely-Hayford, Deirdre Figueiredo, Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, Mark Sealy, and Barbara Walker.

Within the context of such recognition, it might perhaps be the case that systemic absences of black artists from British art are no longer an absolute given.<sup>6</sup> Or, at least, the lavish and conspicuous embracing of certain favored black British artists has effectively masked the wholesale and widespread marginalizing of far greater numbers of practitioners, languishing in what I would describe as a type



**Denzil Forrester**, *Witch Doctor*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 240 x 360 cm. Installation view of *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960–1990* exhibition, Guildhall Art Gallery, London, July 10, 2015–January 24, 2016. Courtesy Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London, 2015

of functional obscurity. Might the late twentieth and early twenty-first century recognition of a clutch of favored black British artists have opened the way for newer and different types of scholarship on these and perhaps also other practitioners?

The major galleries of London, such as the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Serpentine, and Whitechapel, have now hosted main-space solo shows of black British artists' work. This is of unbounded consequence, given that the solo show in the major gallery is in many respects the ultimate art world accolade that can be bestowed on an artist. Taking this further, in recent times we have seen important and substantial solo exhibitions by British artists of color in parts of the country not

traditionally associated, or not associated at all, with communities of color. (There are well established curatorial pathologies that have often "justified" black artists' exhibitions in certain galleries by said galleries' proximities to visible or notable communities of color. Needless to say, within such problematic gallery mindsets, artists' perceived ethnicity was/is privileged way above the artistic content of their practices.) The ultimate art world accolade I mentioned—the solo exhibition—was magnified when exhibitions such as Lubaina Himid's *Our Kisses Are Petals* or Araeen's *A Retrospective* took place at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, in Gateshead, in the northeast of England, an area not substantially known for its ethnic minority presence.<sup>7</sup> It is one



Installation view of *The Other Story: Asian, African, and Caribbean Artists in Post-War Britain* exhibition, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, March 10–April 22, 1990, showing work by **Keith Piper**, **Mona Hatoum**, and **Lubaina Himid**. Photo: Eddie Chambers

thing to see a black artist's exhibition in Birmingham or Manchester; it is quite another thing to see a black artist's exhibition in Cumbria or Penzance.

The changing of the times and (arguably, perhaps) the changing of the fortunes of at least some black British artists might be ascertained in the material status of Frank Bowling. While artists like Ronald Moody and Aubrey Williams had to wait to be very very dead before anything approaching substantial art-world attention was paid to them, Bowling witnessed the inexorable rise in his own stock during the later decades of his life. From the awarding of his OBE and his eventual admittance to the Royal Academy through to his major retrospectives *Mappa Mundi* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2017–18) and *Frank Bowling* (Tate Britain, London, 2019), Bowling represents, perhaps, a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century upswing in the visible fortunes of a limited but significant number of favored black British practitioners. We cannot do not much more than speculate about the

relationship between such things as the conferring of “celebrity” status on certain black British artists and the piecemeal, though nevertheless important, gallery recognition of said artists, on the one hand, and a marked increase in scholarship on black British artists, on the other.

A great deal happened to black artists between *The Other Story*, taking place as it did at the end of the 1980s, and the present closing stages of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Hence, it is in many respects correct and appropriate that an issue of *Nka*, such as this, bringing together recent scholarship related to aspects of black British art histories, be brought into existence. Among the many developments involving black British artists in the three decades since *The Other Story* were significant solo exhibitions by artists like Keith Piper; important group exhibitions such as *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference, and Desire* (held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1995, featuring artists such as McQueen showing alongside several



Foreground: **Frank Bowling**, *Gate*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 165 cm. Background: works by **Aubrey Williams**. Installation view of *The Other Story: Asian, African, and Caribbean Artists in Post-War Britain* exhibition, Cornerhouse, Manchester, May 5–June 10, 1990. Photo: Eddie Chambers

African American practitioners); and perhaps most significant of all, the meteoric rise to art-world superstardom of artists such as McQueen, Ofili, and Shonibare. The success of artists like McQueen, Ofili, and Shonibare was, quite simply, historically unparalleled and included Turner Prize wins, representing Britain at the Venice Biennale, and no end of media adulation. We can also put into the thirty-year post-*The Other Story* era the rise and fall of the Arts Council-sponsored Institute of International Visual Arts, more commonly known by its acronym, INIVA, the letters being presented in varying assortments of upper and/or lower-case characters. Such developments can, in some respects, be seen as providing a backdrop or context for this current issue of *Nka*.

The scholarship assembled in this issue of *Nka* both represents and speaks to an increased attention being paid to black British art histories. Simultaneously, much of the research and investigations gathered here challenge some of the

dominant ways in which black British artists are either routinely framed or have come to be appreciated. The genesis of this issue of *Nka* goes back to *New Directions in Black-British Art History*, a panel held at the 2018 College Art Association conference in Los Angeles and cochaired by Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani, then a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin, and me, a professor in the said department of the same institution. In assembling the panel, we were at once keen to deemphasize uncontextualized considerations of an artist's respective ethnicity, skin color, or "racial" identity and, instead, emphasize narratives of a black artist's proximity to, or involvement in, stories of British art and broader narratives of artistic practices. Our call for papers sought to reflect an insistence that the art comes first, even as it sought to reference some of the latter-day attention being paid to certain artists:

How do Black-British artists factor in the histories of modern/contemporary British art? Canonical

histories of British art often exclude such artists, or accord them only peripheral status. But the generation of artists from countries of the Empire and Commonwealth, migrating to Britain after WWII, helped to transform London into a global center of artistic exchange, despite a political climate characterized by ongoing racialized and jingoistic rhetoric. Rasheed Araeen's exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (1989) was one early attempt to present a history of Black artists' contributions to British art. Since then, there have been other attempts to broaden the canon of British art, including Guildhall Art Gallery's 2015–16 exhibition *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960–1990*; the digitizing of Guyana-born painter Aubrey Williams's archive at Tate Britain; and now, somewhat posthumously, Tate Britain has begun acquiring works by artists including Williams and Ronald Moody (Jamaica). The historicizing of Black-British artists' work has continued for a later generation of practitioners, including Sonia Boyce and Keith Piper, exhibited in Nottingham Contemporary's *The Place Is Here* (2017), though these Black-British artists often struggle with an art world privileging their socio-political subjectivity over the aesthetic object. This panel seeks submissions relating to new scholarship on Black-British modern and contemporary art history. The assembled papers will consider themes such as aesthetic and the formal, the relevance of the diasporic and the post-colonial, themes of transnationalism and globalism, and/or issues of exile and exclusion.

The papers Ohadi-Hamadani and I accepted for our panel tell particular stories about the character of black British art histories. Indie Choudhury, a doctoral art history candidate at Stanford University, proposed a paper on Frank Bowling's *White Paintings*. We also received a submission from Monique Kerman, of Western Washington University, "The Aesthetics of Migration in an Age of Anxiety: Zineb Sedira, Allan deSouza, and Mary Evans." With two of our panel's three papers emanating from US universities, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to extrapolate that it is US academia, as much as if not more so than that of the United Kingdom, which has to a degree established itself as a home for black British studies, including its visual art dimensions. The hard-fought struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that substantially introduced and embedded Black studies in US academia (and with it increased employment opportunities for

black scholars) has had a number of beneficiaries. First and foremost, we can perhaps regard the substantial numbers that comprise the US student body (regardless of ethnicity) as being primary beneficiaries. A diversified curriculum characterized by a far broader range of class and seminar offerings is self-evidently and unarguably a good thing for the student body, and I would imagine that across the universities of the United States far more white students than black students now enroll in classes and seminars offered by faculty (such as Ian Bourland, Georgetown University, and Monique Kerman) teaching classes that might at any given time touch on, or focus on, modern and contemporary African, African American, or African diaspora art history.

Regarding the texts assembled for this issue of *Nka*, the US institutional affiliations of Ian Bourland, Indie Choudhury, Richard Hylton, Monique Kerman, and Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani are counterbalanced by the UK institutional and professional affiliations of Alice Correia, Jareh Das, Elizabeth Robles, and Anjalie Dalal-Clayton. Notwithstanding (or, maybe because of) the modest range of British academic institutions willing to seriously recognize black British art history, the United Kingdom is irrefutably and significantly behind the United States in offering to a wide range of students consistent, regular, and embedded opportunities to learn and research subjects relating to the African diaspora art history at undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. With British universities notoriously reluctant to properly employ black academics, it seems inevitable that, on balance, the center of gravity of the study and the teaching of the work of black diaspora visual artists will remain on the US side of the Atlantic for the foreseeable future. The powerful sentiment, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress," was declared by Frederick Douglass well over a century and a half ago.<sup>8</sup> Given that the endeavor to embed Black studies in US academia and attempts to diversify notoriously Eurocentric art history departments were, respectively, Herculean struggles, and given that British demographics and a host of other factors mitigate against the prospect of such struggles taking place within the British Isles, the likelihood of widespread academic representation of black British art history finding a home for itself in Britain—particularly

outside urban concentrations that are to an extent synonymous with a black presence (Birmingham and London, for example)—is slim indeed.<sup>9</sup>

The new directions in black British art history that the texts assembled here represent do much more than attend to, or counter, the withering, brutalizing, and systemic absences that led Araeen to propose and undertake *The Other Story*. Articles such as Hylton's "Eugene Palmer and Barbara Walker: Photography and the Black Subject," Robles's "Making Waves," and Jareh Das's "Illness as Metaphor: Donald Rodney's X-ray Photographs" embody or represent perceptive, probing, and illuminating considerations of subjects that have always been as fascinating as they are complicated.

There is a constant danger that new scholarship, displaying its newness and shininess, eclipses that which went before it. The 2016 arrival of Sophie Orlando's *British Black Art: Debates on the Western Art History* may have gone some way to underlining the importance and necessity of troubling the complacent whiteness of British art history, though it must similarly be asserted that a publication such as *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity* or Araeen's *Making Myself Visible* very much deserve to be rescued from relative obscurity and put within easier reach of the present generation of art students and researchers keen to know more about black British art histories.<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

1 *The Other Story* featured work by a number of artists, including Rasheed Araeen, such as Saleem Arif, Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Avinash Chandra, Avtarjeet Dhanjal, Uzo Egonu, Iqbal Geoffrey, Mona Hatoum, Lubaina Himid, Gavin Jantjes, Balraj Khanna, Donald Locke, David Medalla, Ronald Moody, Ahmed Parvez, Ivan Peries, Keith Piper, Anwar Jalal Shemza, Kumiko Shimizu, Francis Newton Souza, Aubrey Williams, and Li Yuan-Chia.

2 See Lucy Steeds, "Retelling 'The Other Story'—or What Now?," in *Afterall: Exhibition Histories*, September 30, 2018, staging .afterall.org/exhibition-histories/the-other-story/retelling-the-other-story-or-what-now.

3 The New York exhibition featured work by Faisal Abdu'Allah, Said Adrus, Ajamu, Henrietta Atooma Alele, Hassan Aliyu, Marcia Bennet, Zarina Bhimji, Sutapa Biswas, Sylbert Bolton, Sonia Boyce, Winston Branch, Vanley Burke, Chila Kumari Burman, Sokari Douglas Camp, Anthony Daley, Allan deSouza, Godfried Donkor, Nina Edge, Uzo Egonu, Rotimi

Fani-Kayode, Denzil Forrester, Armet Francis, Joy Gregory, Sunil Gupta, Lubaina Himid, Bhajan Hunjan, Meena Jafare, Gavin Jantjes, Emmanuel Taiwo Jegede, Claudette Elaine Johnson, Mumtaz Karimje, Rita Keegan, Fowokan George Kelly, Roshini Kempadoo, Juginder Lamba, Errol Lloyd, Jeni McKenzie, Althea McNish, David Medalla, Shaheen Merali, Bill Ming, Ronald Moody, Olu Oguibe, Eugene Palmer, Tony Phillips, Keith Piper, Ingrid Pollard, Franklyn Rodgers, Veronica Ryan, Lesley Sanderson, Folake Shoga, Yinka Shonibare, Gurminder Sikand, Maud Sulter, Danijah Tafari, Geraldine Walsh, and Aubrey Williams. Donald Rodney was included in the catalogue, but his work was not in the exhibition itself.

4 The visual art component of the exhibition featured work by artists, including Frank Bowling, Sonia Boyce, Winston Branch, Chila Kumari Burman, Paul Dash, Sokari Douglas Camp, Uzo Egonu, Denzil Forrester, George Fowokan Kelly, Lubaina Himid, Emmanuel Taiwo Jegede, Claudette Johnson, Tam Joseph, Kofi Kayiga, Errol Lloyd, John Lyons, Ronald Moody, Keith Piper, and Aubrey Williams.

5 All three of these historical exhibitions were distinct and unique, though the gap of nearly two decades between *Transforming the Crown* and *No Colour Bar* (more than double the eight years between *The Other Story* and *Transforming the Crown*) possibly speaks to a curatorial ambivalence or a falling out of fashion of larger group exhibitions of black artists' work aimed at historical totality or breadth.

6 The experiences of a significant number of individual black British artists have on occasion included periods of momentary embrace and recognition, followed by periods of summary and protracted marginalization. This has been a pattern since the decades of the mid-twentieth century, and it has only been in recent decades that certain artists have been able to maintain a momentum of success.

7 The exhibitions' dates were May 11–October 28, 2018, and October 19, 2018–January 27, 2019, respectively.

8 In 1857, Frederick Douglass delivered a speech on "West India Emancipation." The immortal words were part of that delivery.

9 On a note of speculative optimism, British culture is particularly susceptible to US hegemony and cultural domination, so perhaps British universities might at some point take their cue from lessons now learned by their US counterparts. That is, it is only when an academic institution's faculty and student body are truly diverse that the institution can claim to have any sort of credibility.

10 Sophie Orlando, *British Black Art: Debates on the Western Art History* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2016); *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*, ed. Maud Sulter (Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire: Urban Fox, 1990); Rasheed Araeen, *Making Myself Visible* (London: Kala Press, 1984).