

# NEW BRAVE WORLD:

By Alice Sachrajda and Marzena Zukowska  
with foreword by K Biswas

With support from Unbound Philanthropy

Featuring contributions from:

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Dawn Foster, Edwina Omokaro, Krzysia Balińska,  
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The power, opportunities  
and potential of pop culture  
for social change in the UK



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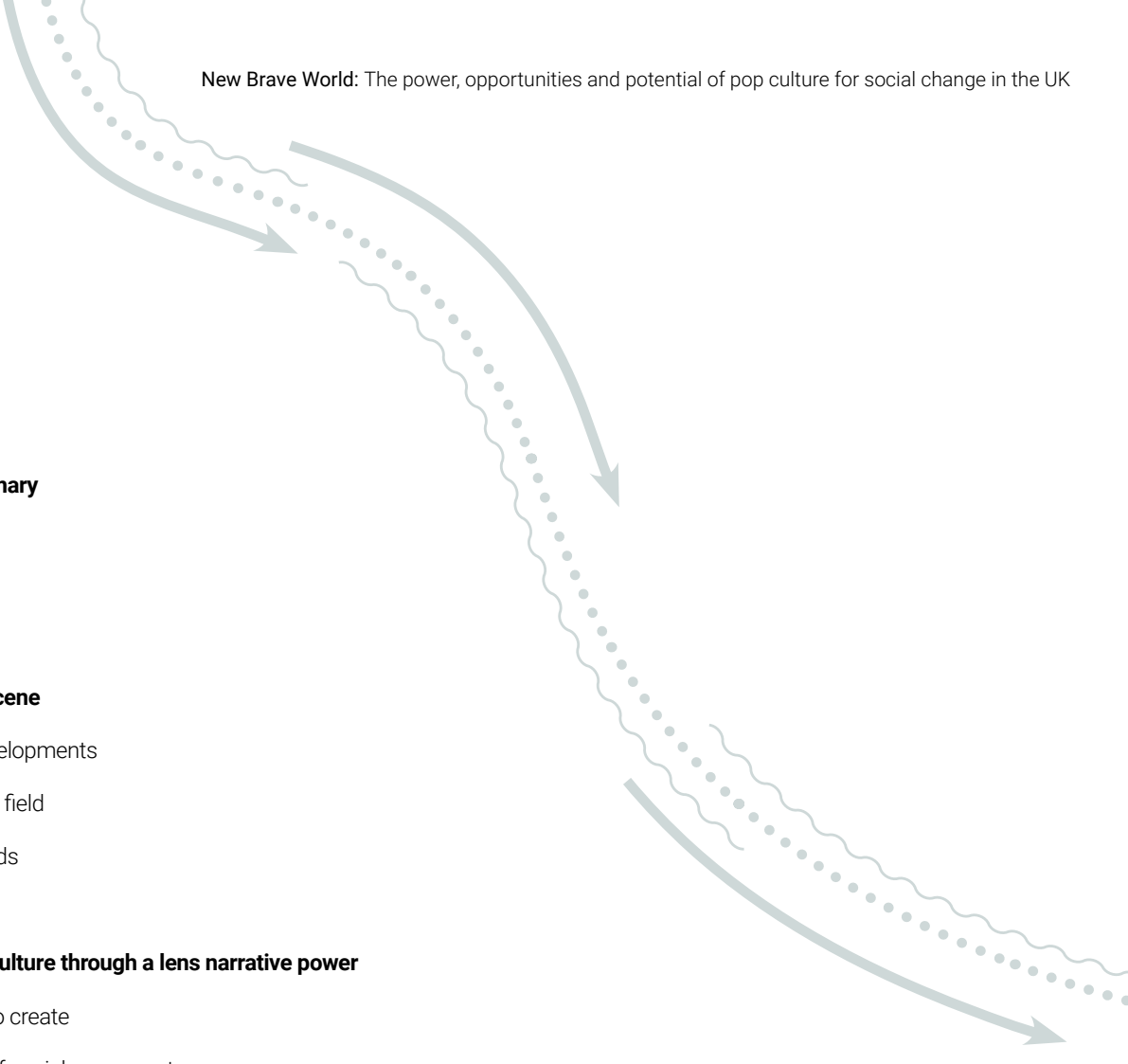
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We are pleased to launch this report at the [Pop Culture meets Social Change retreat](#) organised between [Counterpoints Arts](#) and [OKRE](#) in March 2021.

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# FOREWORD

BY K BISWAS

In 1929 Virginia Woolf, in her celebrated work *A Room of One's Own*, endorsed fellow British writer Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's view that "...the poor poet has not in these days, nor has had for two hundred years, a dog's chance". "Great writings" could only be produced by the financially comfortable as "intellectual freedom", Woolf believed, depended upon "material things". Until the World Wars, a privileged leisure class in Britain largely dictated what was considered culturally worthy. Creatives were drawn from a narrow social and economic pool, with the country's higher orders maintaining control of the major cultural institutions until the 1950s.

State bodies – from BBC radio and television to the Arts Council – alongside market-driven private enterprises produced and circulated the fundamental elements of cultural life across Britain. The extension of secondary education and waves of migration saw historically marginalised perspectives emerge postwar. For the first time, authentic slices of social commentary from outsiders – once considered lacking in universal value by the cultural establishment – were able to reach the widest audiences. The lines between high and popular culture began to blur.

Art was an avenue to agitate for political change. BBC One broadcast *Cathy Come Home* in 1966 to 12 million people (a quarter of the population) starting a nationwide conversation about poverty and homelessness, precipitating longstanding housing campaigns by Shelter and Crisis.

Wide-scale activism was sparked by and sustained through culture, for example the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – whose logo was designed by British artist Gerald Holtom and adopted by the Sixties counterculture to become the international symbol for peace – draws a line from a 1957 *New Statesman* article written by dramatist JB Priestley, through to popular 1980s television films *Threads* and *When the Wind Blows*. Protest movements like Rock Against Racism mobilised through music, bringing together the great punk and reggae bands of the late-Seventies under one banner – Black, Asian and white youth using (sub)culture to contest the creeping menace of Powellism and the National Front, and warn the public of imminent threats to Britain's social fabric.

Into the 21st century, and pop culture can never again be dismissed as frivolous – indeed, it reflects the values of our age. The once marginalised can now take centre stage, as youth led movements – against racism, sexism and inequality, for LGBTQ+ and disability rights or environmental sustainability - who feel locked out of elite political and economic circles, see culture as their site of expression. Tectonic plates are repositioning as the country's cultural establishment signals a wish to address historic imbalances which shut out so much of the populace for so long.

This report by Alice Sachrajda and Marzena Zukowska impressively captures this powershift. Contributors, many of whom are young, radical and passionate about culture, understand that modern audiences, rather than being transfixed by spectacle, often wish to involve themselves in enacting social progress. The divide between active creators and passive viewers or listeners has closed – in its place, a shared experience, empowering people to be the change they wish to see in the world.

In this era of mass communication, where traditional aesthetic forms collide with increasingly affordable and available technology, hierarchies are slowly breaking down. Money and a 'room of one's own' are no longer the preconditions to creativity. The digital space - a social necessity during the Covid crisis - has boundless potential, and can make room for everyone, no matter their wealth and status. Cultural gate-keepers preoccupied with chasing untapped demographics rather than exhaustively transforming their industries may see their audiences simply as consumers, only interested in the increased visibility of those who resemble them. Those who continue to think this way - who fail to appreciate the new brave world – will likely be left behind.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017 the previous report in this series, *Riding the Waves*, analysed how pop culture has the potential to catalyse social change in the UK. It was a scoping study exploring the themes of representation, authenticity, normalisation, narratives, novelty and relationships within the UK's cultural landscape. But, as the name suggests, it was at the surface level of the waves, rather than the waters beneath. This report dives deep into the narrative ocean. We explore the power of cultural currents, the opportunities to harness narrative power through content on television, and we begin to shine a light on the vast, unexplored potential of pop culture for social change.

This metaphor of 'swimming in narrative waters' helps us to make sense of this vast and amorphous area that we term 'pop culture for social change', i.e. work that connects social and environmental justice to pop culture and entertainment. The power of pop culture for social change can be harnessed and influenced — for good or ill. We need to work together to ensure that the powerful tides of cultural change move towards a ['larger us'](#), as opposed to a polarised 'them and us'.

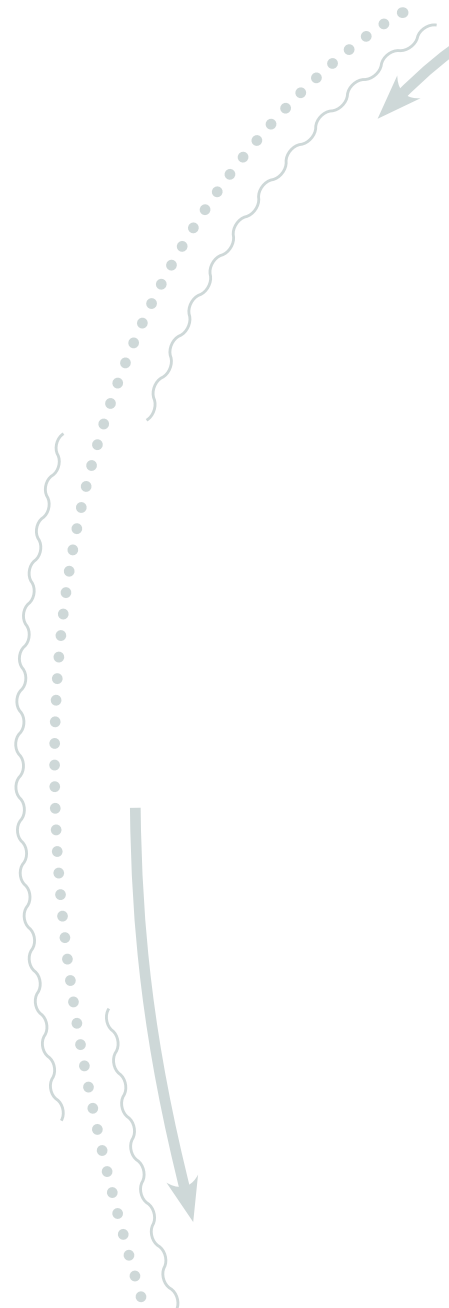
This report focuses on the areas of pop culture where there is momentum for *narrative* change. We prioritise television, film and gaming with scope for mass uptake and narrative influence (and we touch on adjacent areas such as theatre, spoken word, podcasting and comedy). We recognise there is potential across other pop culture areas, such as fashion, sport and music, but they are largely outside the scope of this report.

We are pleased to include contributions commissioned by K Biswas, the editor of *Representology: The Journal of Media and Diversity* and the chair of The Race Beat, a journalism network run by and for people of colour. These articles and in-conversations provide thoughtful enquiry, share personal experience and offer a breadth of diverse perspectives.

The culture we swim in is entangled with politics, socio-economic trends and how our creative institutions function. So we begin this report with a brief contextual overview of developments in the television, film and gaming sectors to set the scene and provide the backdrop for the sections to follow.

The pop culture for social change ecosystem is nascent, which means it can feel disparate and unconnected. We reflect on the value of emerging key players, including: connectors, mentors, researchers, influencers, commentators, innovators and funders. And we explore cultural trends such as the nostalgia perpetuated by Covid-19, the historical reckoning that is playing out on our screens and the ways pop culture helps us imagine a future more multidimensional and inclusive than our present.

The question of impact measurement and evaluation came up time and again during our research. Given the consensus that pop culture powerfully affects our attitudes and behaviour, the next step is to understand more about how and why this happens. We can do this by evaluating the reach and impact of cultural content. But we need to be clear about the information we can infer and the links between cause and effect.



In our deep dive into the narrative ocean, we explore three major themes. They are summarised below:



## POWER:

There is power embedded in who makes, drives and influences cultural content. The content that gets exposure defines whose voices are worth listening to, whose lives matter and what is seen as possible for our futures. We need to understand how structural and narrative power operates within the entertainment industry. We give examples of groundbreaking content, such as Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You*, the youth-led film *ROCKS* and the mobile app *Insecure: The Come Up Game* designed by an all-women team. Creatives, filmmakers and game developers often reach out to social movements for inspiration, new ideas and actionable solidarity. We explore the deep connection between social movements and culture, drawing on the profound impact and global reach of Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and TIME'S UP and migrants' rights. We touch on examples, such as the film *Roma* and the superhero adventure game *Spider-Man Miles Morales*. We share insights from organisations challenging power structures within and around cultural industries, including Code Coven, POC in Play, BAME in Games and Counterpoints Arts. Power also exists as a relational force, and as such, we explore the power of allyship and working together across and between issue areas.



## OPPORTUNITIES:

We need to disrupt existing power structures in order to create vibrant, game-changing cultural content. This section spotlights television drama as a key opportunity area. We draw on case studies from organisations operating in this space, including On Road Media, Access All Areas and StopWatch. These organisations have experience of ensuring that people with lived experience lead, shape and direct the content we watch across dramas and soap operas. The result is meaningful, engaging, nuanced content, which enriches the narrative waters we swim in. This type of engagement with pop culture needs recognition and investment. We also reflect on the growing body of work on framing, narratives and strategic communications, which could be more intentionally joined up to the creative and entertainment industries. Much of this work is disparate and unconnected. We explore where there are opportunities for supporting networks, donor-learning journeys and transatlantic knowledge exchanges. This section looks to the US for inspiration, drawing on the influential work of pop culture for social change organisations including Pop Culture Collaborative, Break the Room, Color of Change and Storyline Partners.



## POTENTIAL:

Narrative change through pop culture is pushing boundaries and stretching our imaginations. We need to link this up with innovative work in the creative sphere to envision the world we want to be living in, not just a reflection of the one we inhabit now. We must look for transformative narratives in unlikely places. The fluidity of culture allows stories to traverse entertainment mediums and forms, from film and television to gaming and graphic novels. The vast rise in popularity of streaming platforms and the global growth of gaming are indications of the direction and speed we are travelling. Gaming and accessible technologies, in particular, are areas of emergent, untapped potential, worthy of research and philanthropic investment. We need, above all, an abundance of representations across mediums, which help to normalise and share a multiplicity of experiences and identities. We share insights from pioneering organisations, including Queerly Represent Me, The AbleGamers Charity, Gayming Magazine and others.

## Below we summarise our conclusions and recommendations:

### Culture has power

Social changemakers and funders need to acknowledge the tremendous power embedded in who makes, drives and influences cultural content. The culture we consume influences how we think, feel, act and behave. We need to recognise that pop culture is a significant driver of change.

### View this work through an intersectional lens

An intersectional approach recognises that culture does not exist in isolation from inequalities based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ability or immigration status — inequalities that not only shape culture but have material consequences in the lives of everyday people. This helps us to address power imbalances and strengthens solidarity across and between our sectors.

### Connect social movements with cultural changemakers

The amplification techniques, knowledge and experience of grassroots social movements must inform the pop culture for social change field. We must invest in creatives and organisers situated between the entertainment industry and social movements who are already leading this work.

### Mapping the pop culture for social change ecosystem

We need to map the emerging pop culture for social change ecosystem in order to visualise it better, help organisations and individuals recognise the value they, and others, bring to this space, explore connections and identify gaps. Any future mapping needs to take into account regional voices and players in the UK and avoid being too London-centric and only spotlighting the 'usual suspects'.

### Under-represented voices and lived experience in writers' rooms

Under-represented voices and people with lived experience need to be in writers' rooms, leading and directing creative outputs. By this we mean people who are Black, POC (people of colour), women, disabled, immigrant, working-class, LGBTQ+ identified and other identities often excluded from entertainment industries. We have seen the powerful impact in scripted drama where unfolding stories can illuminate injustice, while sharing narratives of abundance and joy. This requires investment from funders, including for communications campaigns that amplify the reach of cultural content and ignite public conversations around it.

### A cultural narratives fellowship scheme

There is a growing body of work in the UK on framing, narratives and strategic communications. It is vital work, but at present, not well-connected to the creative and entertainment industries, particularly on racial justice. Funders could amplify the impact of this work by investing in these connections through a cultural narratives fellowship scheme. This would provide a much-needed platform for a raft of cultural strategists with differing experience and perspectives to explore and research how narratives shape and influence culture.

### Pop culture for social change networks

Funders should invest in collaborative networks that help organisations working in the field of pop culture for social change connect with one another. These should focus on practical advice and support, donor-learning journeys and facilitating international collaborations that magnify reach. We also need greater transatlantic connection, learning and collaboration in this space.

### Stretching our imaginations and future visioning

We must be open-minded to transformative narratives in unlikely places. Gaming, accessible technologies and interactive media are emergent, untapped areas of social change, worthy of greater research and investment. It is imperative we get creators and consultants with lived experiences into game writers' rooms to shape narrative design from the outset.

### Cultural evaluation and impact measurement is possible and necessary

In the UK, we must learn from influential cultural change practitioners, academics and researchers in the US who are evaluating and measuring pop culture for social change effectively. We need to bring funders along on this journey.

**The fusion of social change-makers, movement builders, narrative experts, creatives and funders has the potential to be one of the biggest, driving forces of social and environmental change in our world over the years to come. We need to work together to harness the power, opportunities and potential of pop culture for social change. With concerted collaboration and adequate investment it can lead us towards a new, brave world.**



# 1. INTRODUCTION

*"Writers hold an incredible power because they can literally write a narrative and story that will subconsciously influence and start discussions. That's how you influence change and mobilise a generation of people."*

**Zamzam Ibrahim, Climate activist and student politician, presenting at Albert's Soap Storytelling Summit, 2020**

If we want to see social and environmental changes in the world around us, it is not enough to present facts to policymakers or reason through well-framed communications on media channels. We also need to embrace the power of stories and narratives in our culture, which can mobilise generations of people, as Zamzam Ibrahim describes above.

Bridgit Antoinette Evans (cultural strategist and chief executive officer of the Pop Culture Collaborative), an influential changemaker in the US, [speaks powerfully](#) about how we need to actively shape the 'narrative ocean we are swimming in'. This metaphor of 'narrative waters'—now widely referenced by practitioners in the US narrative change field—helps us to understand how pervasively culture influences our lives, and how viscerally we feel the tides of culture pull us in one direction or another. Our aim is to explore ways that cultural narratives can lead us towards a '[larger us](#)', as opposed to a polarised 'them and us'.

This report follows on from the 2017 publication, [Riding the Waves: How pop culture has the potential to catalyse social change in the UK](#), also published with the support of Unbound Philanthropy.

We are delighted to showcase a series of contributions commissioned by K Biswas, editor of *Representology Journal* and chair of The Race Beat, a journalism network run by and for people of colour. These articles, think pieces and interviews enrich this report and provide welcome, thoughtful enquiry and a breadth of diverse perspectives.

Throughout this report we use the term 'pop culture for social change'. By this we mean work that connects social and environmental justice to pop culture and entertainment. We use the term 'ecosystem' to describe the many players, industries and sectors that operate at this intersection. It is a vast area so we prioritise where narrative and cultural change meet and intersect. We focus on the areas where there is scope for narrative influence, such as visual content and storytelling through television, film and gaming. The commissioned contributions throughout this report offer perspectives in related areas, such as music, podcasting, theatre and comedy.

Our analysis and reflections are drawn from desk research, conversations and in-depth interviews. We present a snapshot of the people, organisations and forces building cultural power and driving more inclusive, resonant, accurate and nuanced storytelling and practices in popular culture. Our approach is broad, across migration, racial justice, disability, climate justice, poverty, LGBTQ+ rights and more. Analysing pop culture for social change requires an intersectional lens. This acknowledges the interplay between issue areas, identities and lived experiences that exposes power imbalances, as well as opportunities for solidarity.

This report is for people who are working in (or curious about) the pop culture for social change field, for funders exploring opportunities to invest in this ecosystem and entertainment industry professionals who are keen to collaborate with the voluntary sector.





# GLOSSARY

As communicators, we recognise that language is a form of culture that changes with the times. The phrases and terminology used in this report will shift with the zeitgeist in years to come. Below we include some explanations of terms we have selected in the report:

## Intersectionality

We refer to intersectionality throughout this report. It acknowledges how social categorisations like race, class, gender and sexuality intersect, and the power imbalances they expose. The phrase was coined in 1989 by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, US civil rights activist and legal scholar.

## LGBTQ+

This acronym stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and/or queer', with '+' representing the recognition that there are many more categories used by people to define their non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identity. In referring to individuals, we use the specific identity categories that they use for themselves.

## Larger us

A new, brave world is one where we can view ourselves as an inclusive 'larger us' rather than a polarised 'them and us'. We take our lead from the organisation, [Larger Us](#).

## Narrative power

The idea that the stories, images, films, games and media we produce and interact with are embedded with power. As such, they define whose voices are worth listening to, whose lives matter and what we imagine as possible for our society.

## New brave world

The title of this report plays on Aldous Huxley's 1932 dystopian classic *Brave New World*, which warned of a future society driven by unfettered consumerism and social engineering. Rather than presenting a bleak vision for the future, this report pays homage to the people and communities actively shaping it for the better.

## People of colour

Reni Eddo-Lodge uses 'people of colour' to define anyone of any race who isn't white in her book, *Why I'm no Longer Talking to White People About Race*. We have taken the same approach here. We use 'Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities when citing existing research.

## Pop culture

The conversations, big ideas, major narratives and immersive stories, films, TV shows, music, books, games, political speeches, journalism, and more, experienced by mass audiences of millions of people every day. This definition comes from the [Pop Culture Collaborative](#).

## Pop culture for social change

Work that connects social and environmental justice to pop culture and entertainment. We take our lead from influential organisations in the US such as Pop Culture Collaborative that have carved out this niche and coined this term. We refer to this space as a 'field' and to the people and organisations working in this space as 'the ecosystem'.

## 2. SETTING THE SCENE

Since [Riding the Waves](#) was published in 2017, countless social, political and economic events have shaken the cultural and entertainment industries. The Covid-19 pandemic has driven some sectors to a standstill, while others have moved towards rapid growth.

The Grenfell tragedy, the Windrush scandal and Black Lives Matter uprisings in the wake of George Floyd's murder brought a reckoning around systemic racism and anti-Blackness within UK institutions. The #MeToo movement and the founding of TIME'S UP opened up conversations about workplace sexual violence. And years of organising and pressure by under-represented communities themselves have led to countless industry shifts – from more inclusive hiring practices to investment in more diverse programming.

In this section, we outline major industry developments across television, film and gaming; map the pop culture for social change field; and analyse emerging cultural trends.

### 2.1 INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS

The broadcast, television and film industries have undergone a reckoning in recent years, though lack of representation and diversity remains pervasive. In 2018, only [12 per cent](#) of film, TV and radio workers were from working-class backgrounds – and only four per cent identified as BAME, limiting the perspectives that we see on screen. A recent report by the Creative Diversity Network: [Diamond: The Fourth Cut](#) found a drop in off-screen broadcasting from BAME communities between 2019 and 2020, while disabled people have remained the most under-represented group working off-screen and on-screen in television.

Attempts at change have been made. In 2017, the BBC launched the 50:50 project to target gender parity, expanding the remit in 2020 to include disability and ethnicity representation. In 2019, [June Sarpong MBE](#) was appointed as the BBC's first director of creative diversity, and a year later announced a commitment to prioritise £100 million of the BBC's commissioning budget over three years towards diverse and inclusive content. Other broadcasters have announced similar renewed diversity and inclusion plans following the Black Lives Matter uprisings in 2020. ITV [launched an "acceleration plan"](#) to boost investment in this area. Viacom CBS Networks UK launched a ["no diversity, no commission" policy](#) for its content suppliers. Channel 4 set out a renewed commitment to be ["an anti-racist organisation"](#). The year before, the broadcaster [announced](#) a £1 million investment strategy in nurturing new talent through short-form content.

In the film industry, the British Film Institute (BFI) continues to advocate stronger diversity standards, including behind the cameras and in key production jobs. In June 2018, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) announced that it would adopt the [BFI Diversity Standards](#) in two of its award categories. However, after a backlash against BAFTA's 2020 all-white acting nominations, the academy announced [an overhaul to its award system](#), including adding 1000 new members from under-represented backgrounds to its committees.

Meanwhile, Covid-19 has rattled the film and television industries, forcing cinemas to shut down and grinding new production to a near standstill. The pandemic is said to have wiped £1 billion from [UK box office sales](#), which had long been declining. In July 2020, the [UK government announced](#) a £500 million scheme to support TV and film production, but looming threats of [Channel 4 privatisation](#) have raised public concerns.

Streaming services, however, have boomed. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been poured in to the development of new and expansive Hollywood-style production studios in the UK to meet the demand for content on platforms like Netflix, Disney+ and Amazon. The pause on live action production during Covid-19 has also driven [greater demand](#) for animation and animators.

The UK video game industry also continues to grow, as its worth is [set to triple by 2023](#). This trend has accelerated during Covid-19 with the mobile game market [growing](#) by 50 per cent.

During lockdown, gaming was more lucrative than the TV, music and film industries, as game sales skyrocketed. Yet, intensive periods of overtime, [called crunch](#), have become the labour norm during development cycles.

In 2020, dozens of women from across gaming companies and streaming platforms came forward to describe workplace and online harassment. Unlike in 2019, when the game industry's #MeToo moment was met with a backlash, those coming forward were met with more support than before. UKIE, the games industry trade association, also [published](#) the first "census" assessing diversity in the games workforce in 2020. The report revealed that women and people of colour are still largely under-represented in video companies, though LGBTQ+ representation was much higher than in other sectors. More staggering: a third of workers reported suffering from anxiety and depression, jumping to 50 per cent among trans people. In response to the census, UKIE, supported by social impact groups, launched [#RaiseTheGame](#), urging companies to commit to make their workforces and their games more diverse. To date, 78 companies have signed on.

Many video game studios have also made internal changes. Splash Damage hired Cinzie Musio as the company's first [Diversity & Inclusion Adviser](#). Studio Gobo and Electric Square have worked to support groups like BAME in Games, while working on their own internal recruitment. [Square Enix](#) has made commitments to bringing accessibility to their games. In 2020, Feminist Frequency, which examines pop culture through a gender lens, [reported](#) a marked increase in representation of women protagonists in games released by some of the largest development studios. It is unclear if this trend is set to continue or if 2020 will remain a 'wildcard year'.

## 2.2 MAPPING THE FIELD

Existing and emerging organisations, companies and institutions are beginning to strengthen the 'pop culture for social change' field in the UK. Below we include a snapshot of these organisations, some of which we have interviewed. Some organisations span several thematic areas, all worthy of recognition and funding. A comprehensive mapping of this field and its intersections is needed in the UK. Similar efforts have already been underway in the US, including [this mapping tool](#) created by the Skoll Center for Social Impact Entertainment.

### Convenors, brokers and connectors

The voluntary sector and the entertainment industry operate in different ways, ranging from the funding they receive to the language they use to communicate their objectives and sense of purpose. A voluntary sector body (particularly with charitable status) will have a specific cause or community it advocates for. Conversely, for creatives and entertainment professionals, their primary objective is to create compelling content that drives audience engagement. Connecting these sectors brings vast potential and new opportunities for exciting collaboration. For voluntary sector bodies, it can propel content and ideas to new and mainstream audiences. For creatives, it can be the source of authentic stories and inspiration. Connecting these sectors requires careful brokering. Creatives do not want to be politicised or overly-directed by a cause. Conversely the voluntary sector will want to make sure its issue gets due prominence and authentic portrayal. Operating at this intersection is vital work that requires sensitive mediating, centering of lived experience and considered, long-term investment. Examples include:

[Media Trust](#) works in partnership with the media and creative industries to give marginalised groups a stronger voice. It does this by promoting capacity building for charities and skills-based volunteering by the media and creative sector, empowering young people from diverse backgrounds to work in the industry.

[OKRE](#) is a global hub of expertise bringing together the research sector, entertainment industries and personal lived experience. Its mission is to advance cross-sector collaboration to support the creation of compelling content that expands our understanding of the world.

[On Road Media](#) works to improve media coverage and public understanding of misrepresented groups and issues. It supports people with first hand experience of the issues to do safer, more strategic media work, bringing them together with journalists and creatives to inspire great content.

[Counterpoints Arts](#) set up its programme, [PopChange](#), as a pioneering initiative exploring how the power of pop culture can be harnessed for social change in order to shift the way we talk, think and feel about migration and displacement in the UK. It champions ideas and collaborations across UK pop culture, including football, fashion, gaming, comedy and media.

[Solidarity with Refugees](#) provides advice and support to entertainment industry professionals and creatives on issues relating to refugees to ensure authentic on-screen representation. It connects creatives with grassroots refugee organisations who can share stories and insight.

[Beatfreeks](#) offers insight and youth engagement to companies across the UK to create the 'Institutions of the Future' that stay ahead of the curve by embracing diverse ideas and talent now. From connecting companies with young people to consult on existing ideas, to running think-ins that co-create new ones, its vital community of young creatives work to improve business and shape culture.



## Mentors, trainers and diversity champions

As cultural and entertainment industries seek out diverse talent on and off screen, many organisations are facilitating the process of promoting representation. The careful work to provide support, mentorship and training, particularly for marginalised and under-represented communities, is taking root. However, it requires investment from industries and philanthropy to strengthen infrastructure, develop training programmes and conduct research. In this realm are also organisations putting pressure on the industry to restructure and become more diverse and inclusive. Examples include:

[The TV Collective](#) is an online resource dedicated to promoting the creative and commercial value diversity adds to the British TV and film industries. Its community consists of media professionals whose creativity has been informed by the richness of their diverse experiences. From new entrants to executives, members are eager and committed to contributing to an industry that reflects 21st century Britain.

[Sour Lemons](#) disrupts creative and cultural decision-making tables by bringing in the voices of under-represented young leaders. It runs a leadership programme for young creatives and works to dismantle barriers. Through the programme 'Enabling Environments', it creates space where all young creatives can thrive.

[TIME'S UP UK](#) is an independent, intersectional organisation focused on rooting out sexual harassment at its source. It works to shift power imbalance that leaves women unequal in every industry. Its advocacy work and initiatives are determined in response to UK policy, entertainment industry and women's rights movements.

[MAMA Youth Project](#) recruits, trains and nurtures young people between 18-25 years of age from under-represented groups or with limited educational or employment opportunities. It equips people with the skills and experience necessary to secure long-term and fulfilling employment in the TV and media industry.

[B3 Media](#) is an award-winning network that connects Britain's multicultural creative talent with key figures in the industry. It champions and supports emerging, independent artists working in theatre, film, visual arts, digital art, literature, music and more.

[BAME in Games](#) is a grassroots and volunteer-run community dedicated to encouraging and supporting more diverse talent to work in the games industry, from mobile, online and console gaming, to VR, AR, esports, VFX and animation. BAME in Games offers networking opportunities and hosts monthly meet-ups for gamers and developers.

[Out Making Games](#) works to connect and empower the LGBTQ+ community working in the games industry across the UK. It works to address and overcome the barriers that exist for LGBTQ+ professionals in the industry, both by transforming policies and institutions and by changing hearts and minds through education.

[Black Girl Gamers](#) is a global multi-platform online community dedicated to supporting Black women and Black LGBTQIA+ identified gamers of all ages.

[Autistica Play](#) is the games-focused arm of the UK-based charity Autistica, which conducts research and raises awareness about autism. Autistica Play hosts annual events, partnerships and in-game activities to raise vital funds and awareness for autism research.

[Women in Games](#) is a UK-based community interest company which aims to recruit more women into the video gaming industry and to protect the interests of women in the industry.

[Queerly Represent Me](#) is a not for profit helping marginalised communities through resources, training and support, specialising in working with the games industry.

[SpecialEffect](#) is a UK-based charity which uses video games and technology to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities.

[Balance Patch](#) is an inclusivity, equality and diversity consultancy service specifically developed to support the games industry in creating and sustaining healthy and accessible working environments.

[Code Coven](#) is an education platform and online accelerator for marginalised communities, including people of colour and gender-nonconforming individuals, who want to work in the gaming industry.

[POC in Play](#) is an organisation working to increase the visibility and representation of people of colour in the games industry, while breaking down barriers to entry. The team works on a range of initiatives and programming, including networking events, the #BHMGames100 campaign as a tribute to Black games industry professionals and a week-long BAFTA Games collaboration during UK Black History Month.

## Creators, producers and innovators

There are numerous social impact content creators throughout the UK. There is an increased trend of niche impact entertainment companies producing exciting, cutting-edge, imaginative content from the growth of micro-audiences to viral content platforms. New technology in the gaming and virtual reality (VR) space is also beginning to gain new ground. Like any innovation, this, space is more risky for investors, but also holds the promise of greater returns given the potential for a far-reaching ripple-out effect. There is an urgent role for philanthropy and social impact investment to support emerging talent and provide support, from the concept inception phase, right through to creation and surrounding advocacy post-production. Examples include:

[YouTube Creators for Change](#) is an ongoing global initiative that spotlights inspirational Creators who use YouTube to foster productive conversations around tough issues and make a positive impact on the world. As part of their commitment to the program, Creators for Change Ambassadors and Fellows receive mentorship and promotional support to aid the creation of their Impact Projects — films that tackle a wide range of topics, from self-acceptance and showing kindness to others, to celebrating cultures and advocating global empathy.

[2269](#) is planning to bring people together around the world for 'the Greatest Party of All Time' — a celebration independent of nationality, language, religion or politics on June 6th, 2269. It is an outlandishly ambitious goal designed to remind people today of the bigger picture: life is short, but history is long.

[StoryFutures](#) places innovative storytelling at the heart of next generation immersive technologies and experiences, to fuel the growth of the sector and ensure the UK is leading the way. StoryFutures is focused on R&D projects with businesses to the west of London, while StoryFutures Academy is focused on delivering cutting-edge training for the national screen industries.

[AbleGamers](#) is a nonprofit charity organisation that wields the power of gaming to break down the barriers of economic and social isolation for children, adults and veterans with disabilities. AbleGamers is US-based, but conducts projects in other countries, including the UK and Brazil. [POCC](#) is a community of creatives spanning advertising, tech, media, fashion, arts, film, photography, music, publishing and more. They came together in 2018, united through shared experiences, in both life and within the workplace, to channel energy into making a difference. POCC exists to accelerate equality and equity, for culturally and ethnically diverse people in the creative industries and beyond. It does this through nontraditional ideas, creativity and activism.

[On Purpose Group](#) is a purpose-driven content agency focusing on the planet's biggest challenges. It creates bespoke partnerships around popular high-impact content to change hearts and minds.

[Fingerprint Content](#) has a clear and urgent mission to spark change in the way we portray social issues on screen. It empowers the world's most exciting storytellers to bring their deeply-held passions to life; exploring inequality, race and gender, the power of big business, and, most particularly, climate change, where we encounter all these issues. By engaging audiences with the compelling stories of this disruptive time, it aims to inspire, organise and focus the conversation across film, TV and digital platforms.

[Candour Productions](#) is a multi award-winning independent production company, based outside Leeds. Its passion is to make 'films that make a difference' and it specialises in hard-hitting content on pressing social issues.

[Access All Areas](#) works alongside charities, authorities and organisations of all sizes, from local to national, to improve the quality of life of people with learning disabilities and autism. It offers a range of consultancy across all aspects of theatre-making and creative content, including creating accessible auditions to authentic representation, script development and consultancy. It also has an industry partnership to represent professional actors with learning disabilities. Its artists have starred in *Holby City* (BBC 1), *The Level* (ITV) and *Damned* (Channel 4).

[Good Chance](#) unites communities in its theatre 'domes', telling essential human stories, like *The Jungle*, with its productions and co-creating projects with artists from around the world through its ensemble programme (including a collaboration with Iranian visual artist Majid Adin and Elton John). Its recent series was published on BBC Arts Culture in Quarantine.

[Doc Society](#) is a nonprofit and committed to enabling great documentary films and connecting them to audiences globally. It brings people together to unleash the transformational power of documentary film. It stands in solidarity with filmmakers and works to unite them with new friends and allies, building new models globally.

## Critics, curators and educators

We have a curiosity for commentary and critique about popular culture. The proliferation of podcasts and longer-form journalism in recent years is testament to public appetite for exploratory discussions about the culture we are swimming in. Cultural inquiry, often acting as a weathervane, is a necessary part of the field. Interventions in this space help to map narrative and storytelling trends, offer sense-making, shift power imbalances, provide valuable critiques and explore new ways of thinking and understanding the world around us. Examples include:

[Stuart Hall Foundation](#) (SHF) is inspired by the life and work of Professor Stuart Hall. It is committed to public education, addressing urgent questions of race and inequality in culture and society through talks and events and building a network of SHF scholars and artists-in-residence.

[Representology Journal](#), a collaboration by Birmingham City University and Cardiff University, is a journal for research and best practice in how to make the UK media more representative of all sections of society. It provides cultural commentary and inquiry, exploring issues of race, gender, sexuality and disability, as well as their intersections.

[gal-dem](#) is a new media publication, committed to telling the stories of people of colour from marginalised genders. With its online and print magazine, it is addressing inequality and misrepresentation in the industry through platforming the creative and editorial work of its community across essays, opinion, news, arts, music, politics and lifestyle content.

[Able Zine](#) seeks to increase representation for disabled and chronically ill creatives, young people and communities. As well as encouraging thought and awareness around key issues like accessibility, community care and representation, its aim is to tackle ableism and discrimination through vivid, informative content and provide opportunities for those who may have previously been stigmatised or unwelcome in creative and cultural spaces.

[The Refugee Journalism Project](#) supports refugee and exiled journalists helping them to re-start their careers in the UK. It is based at the London College of Communication, part of the University of the Arts London. The project supports refugee journalists wanting to work in the UK media industry. It aims to publish their work and build a wider network, to engage with new audiences and key policy and opinion-makers in order to debunk negative and institutional and public perceptions of refugees.

[Gayming Magazine](#) is the first video game news site dedicated to LGBTQ+ communities. Founded in 2019 with the recognition that more needs to be written about queer characters and queer games, the magazine leads in-depth reporting, as well as hosting a range of activities, including *Gayming Awards*, a podcast, live events and an effort to catalogue as many upcoming LGBTQ+ games as possible.

[Culture Reset](#) is a programme to reimagine the future of arts and culture, particularly in response to the impact of Covid-19 on the cultural industries. It offers up commentary, provocations, reports and tools around the theme of #CultureReset.

[What We Seee](#) sets out to democratise access to enrich music, film, art and culture and to be a safe, inspiring place for brands to tell their stories. Its mission is to surface and amplify uplifting and inspirational stories in a curated stream from diverse voices, artists, archives and brands to raise the tone of cultural conversation.

[Can I Play That?](#) is a game accessibility resource for players and developers, which includes in-depth accessibility reviews and guides for games, commentary and opinion pieces from disabled gamers and an online community space.

[Migration Museum](#) is a cultural centre that explores how the movement of people to and from the UK across the ages has shaped the country and society. Based in Lewisham, London, the museum puts on events, exhibitions and educational programming.

[National Videogame Museum](#) is a culture centre and museum based in Sheffield and dedicated to the history and exploration of video games. Its charity arm, the BGI, runs educational programmes around games culture, research, production, skills and diversity.

[LGBTQ Games Archive](#) offers a robust documentation of LGBTQ+ content in digital games from the 1970s-2020s. The master list currently includes over 1200 games, with 400 fully researched. It is a resource for researchers, journalists, critics, game designers, students, gamers and anyone else who is interested in learning more about the history of LGBTQ+ content in video games.



## Researchers and evaluators

Research, evaluation, monitoring and standard-setting help us understand how the creative industries are operating and how content has impact. We need to do more to support and elevate research, exploring how cultural content and entertainment influences how people think and feel about social and environmental issues. Examples include:

The [Impact Field Guide](#), produced and updated by Doc Society is a valuable step-by-step toolkit exploring how content has impact, right from the planning phase through to production, distribution and the impact measurement stage. It draws heavily on experience from documentary filmmaking, but is an insightful tool for anyone working at the intersection of social and cultural change.

[The Screen Industries Growth Network](#) works collaboratively with higher education institutions and industry partners to generate new and valuable insights. Its research will strengthen understanding of digital creativity and screen storytelling across interactive media, artificial intelligence, film, TV, games and other digital screen-based technologies. It wants to secure the future of screen-related industries, particularly in Yorkshire and the Humber, and enhance the region's competitiveness.

[Albert](#) is uniting the screen industries to make a positive environmental impact and inspiring audiences to act for a sustainable future. It is governed by an industry consortium to help those working in film and TV understand their opportunities to create positive environmental change. It carries out research, has introduced a sustainability certification, provides support to editorial teams and offers guidance to film and TV production.

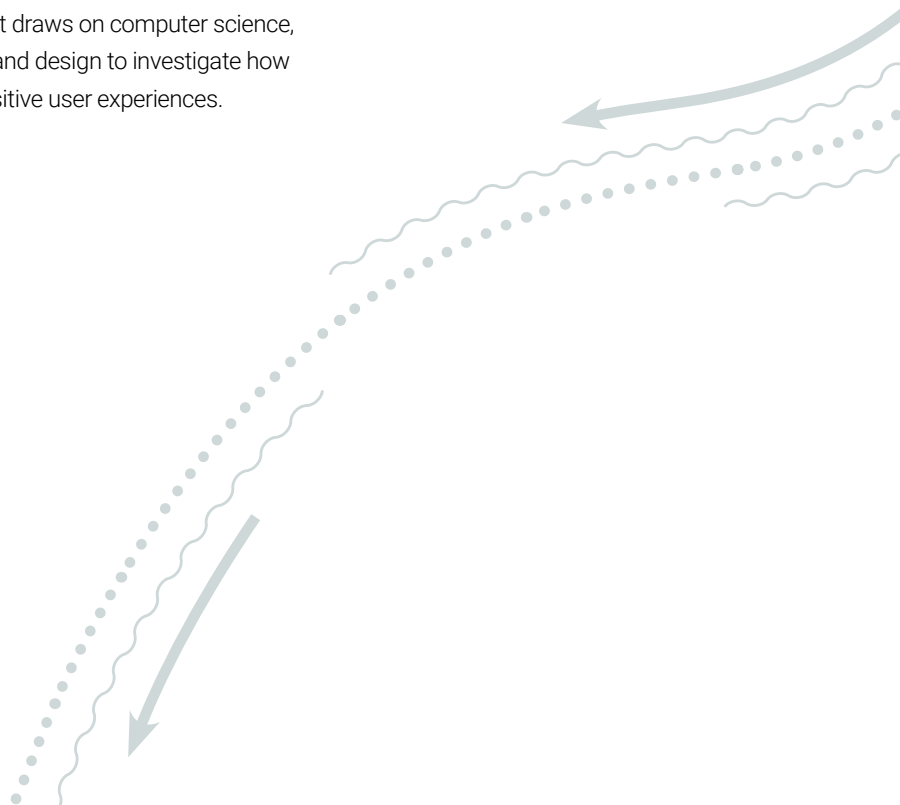
[Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity](#) is a newly established research centre, bringing together the expertise of established media professionals and academics. It believes that accurate representation of all sections of society in all layers of the UK media is vital.

[Creative Diversity Network](#) promotes diversity and inclusion in the UK broadcasting industry. It captures data and shares best practice with the industry. Its measuring system, called Diamond, collects data about the gender, gender identity, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability of people working on or off screen on all UK-originated productions.

[The Visionary Arts Foundation](#) advocates social change and debate created through culture, media and entertainment. In addition to providing support and mentoring to young adults, it hosts an annual awards show, the Visionary Honours, celebrating popular culture, media and entertainment that has inspired social change or debate.

[UKIE](#) is a nonprofit trade association for the video game and interactive entertainment industries in the UK. UKIE represents micro studios, multinationals, developers, publishers and service companies, working across online, mobile, console, PC, esports and immersive sectors.

[HCI@York](#) is a dynamic, collaborative community at the University of York that conducts world-class research and teaching in how diverse groups of users interact with technology. It draws on computer science, psychology and design to investigate how to create positive user experiences.



## Funders and investors

Philanthropy and impact investment play a vital role in nurturing and catalysing the pop culture for social change field. The cultural content we swim in impacts on how we think and feel about social issues and it can do that in positive and negative ways. Funding can help to steer the course towards positive social and environmental cultural shifts. Broadcasters and independent production companies are beginning to change their ways of working, but there are many areas ripe for investment, including mapping and scoping, network and relationship building, careful brokering, support with ideation, content production, centring of lived experience, commentary and critique, impact measurement and evaluation. Examples include:

[Unbound Philanthropy](#), a US and UK funder, is a longstanding supporter of arts for social change work. In the US, Unbound Philanthropy is a founding managing partner of the Pop Culture Collaborative. The Collaborative is working to support the growth of the pop culture for social change field. In the UK, Unbound Philanthropy is a founding funder of arts and social change initiatives such as Counterpoints Arts, Stuart Hall Foundation, OKRE, Migration Museum and On Road Media.

[Wellcome Trust](#) is a global charitable foundation that supports science to solve the urgent health challenges facing everyone. Its strategy includes grant funding, advocacy campaigns and partnerships to find solutions for today's urgent health challenges. For years, Wellcome Trust has facilitated collaborations between communities of knowledge, research and entertainment, and incubated OKRE.

[Comic Relief](#) is promoting diversity and representation in the creative sectors, providing support for Black-led filmmaking and working with high profile public figures to promote social issues.

[Open Society Foundations](#) is investing in the PopChange programme at Counterpoints Arts and Good Chance Theatre, among others.

[Paul Hamlyn Foundation](#) supports organisations working on youth culture, migration and the arts, leading to investment in organisations such as Beatfrecks and On Road Media.

[Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) is inspiring social change through an innovative combination of research and content creation, including support for the film [A Northern Soul](#).

[Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#) is investing in charities improving representation of marginalised communities, including Access All Areas and On Road Media.

[The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation](#) is supporting enquiry into the role of civic arts, supporting Culture Reset and exploring opportunities at the intersection of content creation and climate justice.

[Nesta](#) is working to support the field of social impact investment and funding innovation in digital arts and culture content creation through its [Amplified](#) programme.

## 2.3 CULTURAL TRENDS

In this section, we pair emerging cultural trends in visual entertainment with articles and conversations written by culture critics, content creators and performers.

### Covid-19 and nostalgia: from the apocalypse to period dramas

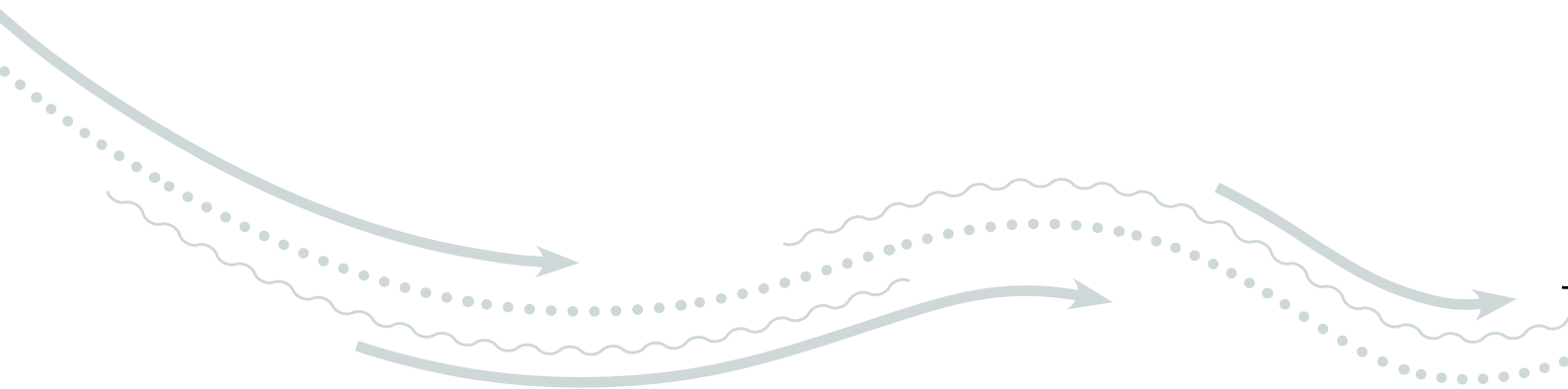
In the early weeks of Covid-19, apocalyptic virus films like *Contagion* and *Outbreak* were trending on Netflix. The mobile game *Plague, Inc.*, where you grow your own global pandemic, reached record downloads in the UK. Many of us looked to [fantastical entertainment](#) to understand an uncertain present.

Soon, school closures and furloughs offered time for reflection, heralding a demand for more mundane entertainment. The reality show *Gogglebox*, where cast members sit parked in front of the telly commenting on the latest shows or railing against government news reports, [broke numerous records for Channel 4](#). The game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* brought a semblance of routine and connection to tens of millions of players, who organised in-game funerals, marriages and protests. Even advertisers, in the midst of plummeting revenues, picked up on the trend, leaning into socially-conscious, sometimes light-hearted, [#StayAtHome adverts](#). Meanwhile some [TV shows](#), from *Normal People* to *Tiger King*, became international phenomena.

As Covid-19 brought film and TV production to a halt, the demand for reruns spiked.

[A study from Thinkbox.tv](#) found that light-hearted comedies like *Only Fools and Horses* became a way to alleviate monotony and “escape from reality.” Channel 4 made US sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, *Frasier* and *Cheers* available in their entirety. Spotify, home to 270 million listeners, saw a [54 per cent increase](#) in throwback playlists. In our desire for a return to normal, it makes sense we’d look to the past.

This march towards nostalgia, however, existed before Covid-19. Period dramas like *Downton Abbey* have long been [critiqued](#) for propagating a “fantasy about whiteness and stability,” while omitting people of colour from British history. This mirrors a similar trend in public attitudes: a 2014 [YouGov poll](#) found that a third of Britons saw the British empire as a source of pride rather than shame. Campaigners built on this “imperial nostalgia” during the 2016 Brexit referendum, promising to return the UK to a safer and simpler time. More period dramas today are countering this trend through racially-diverse casting. In *Bridgerton Unlaced* (pp.18-19), writer Leah Cowan wrestles with the efficacy of this approach in the series *Bridgerton*, assessing if period dramas can “stand up to the scrutiny of a Black feminist lens”.





# BRIDGERTON UNLACED

## CAN PERIOD DRAMAS BE A PLAYGROUND FOR THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION?

BY LEAH COWAN

Period dramas are well-placed to imagine and re-imagine realities. As a storytelling mode, it walks hand-in-hand with fantasy. Both formats engage in elaborate and spectacular world-building; borrow from history but include significant embellishments; and are often propelled by struggles of power and hierarchy. Knowing this, the promise of a new romantic period drama cut from the distinct cloth of Shonda Rhimes' production company Shondaland, with a cast diverging from the snowy white landscapes characteristic of the genre, piqued popular interest. Seeking escapism on a lonesome Boxing Day, I tuned in with a bowl of crisps and one question taking its government-approved daily perambulation around my mind: could this slice of popular culture produce imaginative and meaningful representations of Black women in the period genre?

While period dramas set in the 19th century often lament the relative disempowerment of aristocratic women, they generally gloss over the deep chasms of inequality which existed and continue to exist within society along lines of race and class. So whilst I'm a dedicated watcher of these shows, I'm also realistic about whether conventions of the form can generate a forum for three-dimensional characters which stand up to the scrutiny of a Black feminist lens. The usual confection of period drama is only a partial world. In reality, behind the enrobed alabaster bosoms and glittering silver jam spoons are a majority of working-class people who toil in factories and fields enabling the protagonists of period dramas to titter into their pheasant soufflé and exchange genteel remarks about the price of brocade.

On screen, we see 19th century dukes and viscounts dressed in fine silk - behind the scenes, the violent, ravenous machinery of the industrial revolution which popularised the concept of 'fashion' was built on [the forced removal of 12.5 million people from Africa](#), and enslavement of those who survived the middle passage. The extravagant costume and finery showcased in shows of this ilk feast on an aesthetic reliant upon the forced labour of African people - this crucial, but inconvenient detail is commonly absent from the frame.



At the upper end of *Bridgerton's* social strata, Lady Danbury (played by Adjoa Andoh), and Queen Charlotte weave compact but compelling tapestries from their allotted narrative threads. In *Bridgerton*, as is typical in the period drama universe, women are bred and traded like cattle ostensibly to consolidate or protect men's access to land, property, titles or capital. The extent to which Black women in particular are shown as agents in their own and each other's lives is - as is perhaps historically accurate - questionable. As Ineye Komonibo writes for [Refinery29](#): "Lady Danbury was definitely giving me magical negro vibes... she should be a whole person". Komonibo references the storytelling trope of a sage, mystical Black character who manifests in a scene merely to chivvy other characters along a path of enlightenment, with little real narrative arc for themselves (see Carrie Bradshaw's personal assistant Louise in the first *Sex and the City* film, or Morgan Freeman's character in *The Shawshank Redemption*). Lady Danbury's interactions with Queen Charlotte are brief exchanges and knowing looks - perhaps a representation of knowledge that is shared but unspoken. We can only hope that their relationship is explored further in the (inevitable) second season.

Crucially, Queen Charlotte provides the focal point for the sole moment when race is directly addressed in the show. In episode 4, Lady Danbury tells the Duke: "We were two separate societies divided by colour, until a king fell in love with one of us. Love, Your Grace, conquers all". Outside this exchange - the articulation of Queen Charlotte as a Black queen, rather than a Black actor playing a queen - it could almost be assumed that race doesn't exist within the world of *Bridgerton*. This conversation shatters that illusion and forces us to further suspend disbelief and encounter the rest of the episodes with the idea that Queen Charlotte achieved racial harmony in 1813 by doing the exact same thing that drove online trolls and incessant media harassment to Megan Markle's doorstep in 2018. Queen Charlotte is arguably the most powerful woman in *Bridgerton*, but we are constantly dragged away from learning much about her interior world. The miniscule snippets we learn about her relationship with

King George are tantalising and deserving of much more expansion.

For the less wealthy Black women characters in the show, the site for action is drastically reduced. Alice Mondrich is charming as the boxer's wife, and her relationship with Will Mondrich is depicted as warm and loving. Will and Alice's decision to con the deep-pocketed punters at a boxing match rather than to endlessly "pander and grovel to the likes of [the aristocracy]" is a rare moment of two Black working-class characters naming the inequality they are subject to, and together taking action.

The narratives of Marina Thompson and Madame Genevieve Delacroix, meanwhile, primarily cross paths when Marina effectively blackmails Madame Delacroix into continuing to work for her heinous guardian, Lady Featherington. Marina can relate to Madame Delacroix's circumstances perhaps more than any other character in *Bridgerton* - both women are beholden to the whims and favours of the rich residents of 19th century London - and yet she demonstrates an utter lack of solidarity in the dogged pursuit of social climbing. Both women are Black, neither of them are wealthy, and in a show where much is enjoyably fantastical, the feminist imagination here - which could have represented Black women acting in collaboration rather than competition - stops short.

Ultimately, the show was an escapist, fantastical diversion from my Tier 4 Christmas, but as the final credits rolled I was left with questions unanswered. Does race exist in *Bridgerton*, or not? For a show set at the height of the slavery abolition movement in the UK, is it so wild to expect some sort of recognition of the existence of racism? And if *Bridgerton* is able to put a contemporary spin on a stale genre - with Ariana Grande sound-tracking a 19th century ball - why was it too much of a stretch to depict prominent Black women characters contentedly in love, in friendship, and acting in solidarity with each other?





## Historical realism: from colonial past to queer liberation

Whether in school curricula, period dramas or blockbuster films, British history has long been told through a white, middle-class, heterosexual and male lens. The last few years, however, have brought a host of films and television programmes that have reckoned with the UK's past, whether colonial legacies of empire or whitewashing of LGBTQ+ history.

*Small Axe* (2020), director Steve McQueen's five-part film anthology, documents stories of Black British life from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. *Mangrove*, the first in the collection, follows nine Black Londoners in Notting Hill tried for incitement to riot after a protest in 1970. Their acquittal became the first public acknowledgment of racism by the police. Viewers bear witness to histories often erased from public discourse and school books – [as Notting Hill residents note](#). In *Lovers Rock*, rather than follow a historical event, we step into a 1970s house party guided by two lovers. Without confines of a strict plot, the camera lingers on long immersive scenes of dancing to reggae classics. There is subversive power in these joyful scenes and in a series so laden in Black British culture. As *GQ*'s [Olive Pometsey writes](#), "So rare are depictions of unadulterated Black joy on screen, particularly within a historical context, that we're trained to expect the worst."

In a series that reckons with the UK's post-colonial past, how it is told, and who gets to tell it, McQueen's gaze matters. Born in West London in 1969 as the son of Windrush generation immigrants, McQueen witnessed firsthand the influence of the West Indian community on the UK. "I wanted to see stories that weren't available. And I thought, Well, I'll have to make them."

Personal imperative also drove director Russell T Davies, creator of *Queer As Folk*, to write a series about queer London at the cusp of the AIDS epidemic. "I was there," Davies told *Esquire*. "I was 18 in 1981, so I've

been wanting to tell this story for that long. But we were still mid-trauma and I can only presume, in hindsight, that I was just too close to that." Channel 4's *It's A Sin* (2020) follows 18-year-old flatmates over a decade: from public confusion and AIDS denialism in the early 1980s to outright institutionalisation of homophobia by the Thatcher-led government. Though stumbling over a couple of [tropes](#) and [omissions](#), the show has been [hailed](#) for its multidimensional characters and vibrancy of LGBTQ+ community life shaped by acts of solidarity and resistance in the face of devastating loss. The drama has amassed 18.9 million views since its debut and [coincided with HIV Testing Week](#). The Terrence Higgins Trust announced that 8,200 HIV tests were ordered in one day, smashing their previous daily record of 2,800.

*It's a Sin* is one of several shows that points to a renaissance in queer entertainment.

*Pose*, a US breakout series about New York's drag ballroom culture builds on the legacy of the Stonewall Riots (see documentary *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*). *Pose* centres queer and trans people of colour as protagonists, actors and script advisers, which, as the documentary *Disclosure* reveals, remains all too rare in the TV and film industries. Critical to the show's success was [the team behind it](#): Janet Mock was hired as the first trans woman of colour writer for a TV series, while creator Steven Canals became the first queer Afro-Latinx producer nominated for a drama Emmy.

In *LGBTQ+ podcasting* (p. 21), writers Juliet Jacques and Huw Lemmy discuss podcasts as a platform for queer and trans creators to examine culture, politics and queer history.



# LGBTQ+ PODCASTING

## CREATING THE CONTENT WE WANT TO SEE

### IN CONVERSATION WITH JULIET JACQUES AND HUW LEMMEY



**Huw Lemmey:** When we started the *Bad Gays* podcast, it was because we felt like the level of conversation about queer history in public was still stuck at a '101' level – examining the past in search of heroes whose sexuality had been suppressed or erased, and that there was an audience for more complicated stories of LGBTQ identities.

You've said with the radio programme *Suite* (212) that your aim has been to look at the arts and culture in the UK explicitly within their political context. Do you think that, in a similar way, this was something that had always been missing, or was that once part of audio broadcast culture that has since disappeared? Did you realise there was an audience whose desire for political analysis of culture wasn't being met?

**Juliet Jacques:** For years I'd wanted to do a radio programme that talked to writers in depth about their social concerns, creative processes and literary influences, as the UK never had many things like this but the ones it had, such as *The South Bank Show*, had disappeared.

*Suite* (212) ended up becoming more about the legacy of post-war cultural democracy, as well as political questions around the arts, with conversations being led by practitioners in different fields as well as cultural workers. Our audience isn't huge compared to the more directly political podcasts, but it's dedicated and engaged.

*Bad Gays* intrigues me as historical queer people have often been presented as saints in response to homophobia, but can you talk about the political uses of telling more complex stories?

**Huw Lemmey:** I think with *Bad Gays* our project came from a similar place, in that we felt there weren't many people producing the sort of LGBTQ history content we wanted to see. As LGBTQ people have become marginally more accepted, there's definitely been an increasing amount of cultural output aimed, very loosely, at or about us, but ironically it can sometimes feel like there's not much made by and for us.

As a lot of queer content has an eye to a wider (cis and straight) audience, we felt like sometimes LGBTQ history was really entry-level. Historically there was a project to look back to the past for LGBTQ icons whose existence proved that in some way we'd always been here, and that could provide role models that showed we could be more than tragic or criminal figures. It was a worthy task but we wanted to produce a queer history podcast that was accessible, but that didn't assume an elementary level of understanding of queerness, and was prepared to look at the more complicated histories within queer lives. In its own way, we definitely see that as a political project. Our framing of the development of queer identities happens through our own political ideas explicitly.

How has your political framework changed the way you interact with your audience, and the platforms you've chosen to go through to distribute and fund the show? Is there anything you've shied away from covering due to your audience, or due to the avenues available to distribute the podcast?

**Juliet Jacques:** We actually have very little interaction with our audience! It's quite 'Reithian' (to inform, educate, and entertain

– the three principles of public service broadcasting in the UK as established by the BBC's first Director General John Reith), and made in the 'one-to-many' tradition of radio. Occasionally I ask Twitter followers what they'd like a show about, and of course I listen to feedback, but mostly I like to cover something that interests me, and hope people come along. I certainly haven't shied away from any topics due to our audience. Politically, it's important to be accessible, but also treat people like they're interested and intelligent – we're never deliberately obtuse but we never dumb it down either.

We distribute through corporate platforms – mainly Soundcloud and iTunes, as well as Twitter – but funding comes from small donations and recently a grant from the Lipman-Miliband Trust. The biggest concern for me was the Arts Council. An ACE grant would allow the show to do much more, but would tie us to a government funding body, inevitably compromising us – I might self-censor even if they didn't. I wouldn't work with Sky Arts, but if the BBC offered to take on the show then I'd at least consider it. They haven't offered yet, mind...

## The power of comedy: depicting the complexity of everyday life

British comedy has undergone a transformation in recent years. Streaming services, from Netflix to BBC iPlayer have [pulled](#) episodes of British sitcoms featuring blackface and other racist depictions. Years of public pressure have pushed commissioners to invest in bringing more diverse voices and original ideas to the small screen. Meanwhile, a number of emerging creators — young people of colour, women and working-class individuals — are reimagining the power of humour and comedy to inventively tackle a range of social issues.

BBC 3's *This Country* finds comedy in the banalities of working-class life in rural England, while pointing to the structural inequalities felt in UK towns that have been "left behind", *This Country* refuses to pathologise its residents — they are drawn with compassion and complexity by writers and co-stars

Daisy May Cooper and Charlie Cooper, who grew up nearby. As [one local resident](#) said, "It's good old British humour but also real. Everyone knows a Kerry and a Kurtan."

Channel 4 has been serving up fresh talent through its "bitesize" Comedy Blaps, which invite young and promising producers to submit short sketches for potential shows. The format has served as a pipeline to a diverse pool of talent and a way to encourage narrative risk-taking. The programme gave wings to Michaela Coel's previous bawdy comedy hit *Chewing Gum* about London estate [life](#), which earned her a BAFTA. In *Chewing Gum*, Hackney's Pensbourne Estate is [bursting with colour](#) and eccentric yet personable neighbours. Coel's character is a Black woman unabashed in her sexuality and her "weirdness" —

a [rare character welcomed by viewers](#).

Since *Chewing Gum*, Comedy Blaps has doubled in budget and portfolio, serving more diverse programming. *Bounty*, created by comedian Tez Ilyas, tells the story of a young British Muslim man trying to balance cultural expectations with his new life in London. In *Halfbreed*, aspiring teenage poet Jas grapples with being the only mixed-race teenager in a small town. And *Lady Parts*, the Blap-turned-series created by [Nida Manzoor](#) and already in production, chronicles the trials and tribulations of an all-women Muslim punk band.

Read more in *Performing comedy is an expression of power* (p. 23), as journalist and comedian Suchandrika Chakrabarti explores the power comedy as a genre for tackling social issues. In the piece, Chakrabarti shares insights from Krzysia Balińska, a performer from the No Direction Home migrant comedy troupe.



# PERFORMING COMEDY IS AN EXPRESSION OF POWER

BY SUCHANDRIKA CHAKRABARTI,  
FEATURING KRZYSIA BALIŃSKA

In January 2020, preceding the first UK lockdown, I decided to act upon a long-held dream: I'd give stand-up comedy a go. Although as a journalist, I had stood on stages and in front of cameras to speak both prepared and off-the-cuff words, it's not quite the same as stand-up. There is more character creation than I thought there would be, even if the character I'm playing is very close to aspects of myself.

I found the voice for my first stand-up set after spending the weekend with my toddler niece. I play an aunt who gives her small niece wildly inappropriate advice, and is wondering what the future will look like for her – what she imagines to be fairly apocalyptic. This framing device allows me to think about how my niece will look back on our time, and so, indirectly, I get to satirise this strange moment we live in. [Looking back at my set](#), political and feminist issues do run through its core. I talk about climate change, how headlines are written, and how women get out of tricky situations with men.

Performing comedy – like being in the position to produce journalism – is an expression of power. It is a demand to be heard, because your point of view is worth knowing. The people who inhabit either of these roles successfully will capture our precious attention. However, there is greater creative freedom in holding the microphone, standing on the stage in a comedy club – or unlocking the phone, opening the front-facing camera –

than there is in being a journalist. Comedians get to choose creativity over just facts.

As actress and comedian Krzysia Balińska says, this power has, until very recently, been held by one demographic: "I've always associated stand-up with something that is quintessentially British, white and male. This must have been my only reference point to stand-up, for some reason, and it made me feel as if this would never be for me, both as an audience and performer."

Balińska grew up in Poland, and is now based in London, where she got her start in stand-up through the [No Direction Home](#) troupe for new comics from refugee and migrant backgrounds. She wanted to try out comedy because "laughter opens people up. You might laugh at a joke in the moment, but the realisation about where the laughter was actually directed might come to you later on."

There is a surrender to the moment of laughter, when the audience is lost in reacting, rather than thinking. Then there is the afterglow, in which the ones who laughed feel as though the comic 'gets' them. In this locked-down moment, when [news avoidance](#) is sky-high, comedy provides community, uplift, a microsecond of feeling more powerful than the circumstances we find ourselves in.





## Case Study:

### No Direction Home

Counterpoints Arts develops creative partnerships with the arts and entertainment industry focused on migration and displacement. [No Direction Home](#) is a project created by the organisation's partnership with Camden People's theatre and comedian Tom Parry. Since 2018, more than 20 new comedians from refugee and migrant backgrounds have been mentored and performed at live and online gigs with guest headliners, including Romesh Ranganathan, Rosie Jones and Nish Kumar. In 2020, the comedians staged the first ever virtual comedy tour via Zoom in partnership with 12 organisations and venues across the country. Hundreds of people tuned in live and the series received widespread media coverage. The shows embody a powerful form of self-representation for the performers, connecting with their audiences through laughter.

Speaking to Counterpoints Arts' broader work, PopChange producer Nike Jonah said:

*"We have been supporting the development of a popular culture for social change ecosystem in the UK over the last few years, focusing primarily on comedy, football, gaming and music. In that time, we have seen that there is a great deal of enthusiasm and work to be done on linking up cultural and migration sectors, brokering new relationships, finding a common language that makes sense in different contexts. But what has been particularly encouraging is how the PopChange ecosystem and approaches have evolved from being 'full of potential' to being a dynamic, powerful and increasingly normalised means of change."*

### From sci-fi to afrofuturism: imagining a future beyond dystopia

Science fiction and other speculative genres expand our imaginations, whether that is through alternative histories, technologically advanced worlds or societies on the brink of apocalyptic disaster. They push us beyond the present and challenge us to consider the impact of our actions as a society. Science fiction, as adrienne maree brown writes in the book *Emergent Strategy*, is "simply a way to practice the future together."

In a genre with infinite possibilities to upend the status quo, science fiction on screen and in literature has long suffered from a lack of diversity. As critics [have pointed out](#), science fiction accolades veer overwhelmingly towards straight white male writers, while authors like Ursula K Le Guin and N K Jemisin are [seen as the exception](#). When they appear as characters in films or books, people of colour or women are often sidekicks rather than leading protagonists (unless it's [Will Smith](#)).

This reality, however, has been rapidly changing. Films like Marvel's blockbuster *Black Panther*, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and music-to-film cross-overs like Janelle Monae's *Dirty Computer* have brought [afrofuturism](#) and Black feminist science fiction tradition to the fore of mainstream culture. As *Bitch Media* writer Mary Retta [summarises](#): "While *Get Out* offers Black audiences a chance to reflect on the role of whiteness in altering our view of our own identity, *Black Panther* gives viewers an exaggerated version of the critical relationship between the African diaspora and technology, and *Dirty Computer* imagines a world where Black people have more control over our manipulative and exploitative US government." This current wave builds on [decades](#) of work by artists, writers and musicians like Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney and Sun Ra.

As a genre, afrofuturism has not shied away from social justice issues. In the film *Fast Color*, Black women protagonists tackle climate crisis and save the earth from an eight-year drought by [building on generational](#)

[power](#). Implicitly, the film responds to long-standing [critiques](#) of the climate justice movement's failure to recognise the leadership of activists of colour. The series *Noughts + Crosses*, adapted from the popular young adult series by Black British writer Malorie Blackman, explores entrenched racial bias by creating what critic [Amanda-Rae Prescott](#) [calls](#) a "distinctly Afrofuturist dystopian society." By imagining an alternative history in which African people colonised European society, the series creates space to reflect on systemic racism in the present.

In *Lemonade braids* (p. 25), writer Edwina Omokaro, co-founder of the Halo Collective, explores the afrofuturist aesthetic of Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* and its power in "sparking a cultural revolution."



# LEMONADE BRAIDS

BY EDWINA OMOKARO

"What happened at the New Orleans?", a voice booms as we see Beyonce crouching atop a New Orleans police car submerged in flood water in the video for her 2016 single *Formation*. As she descends into a crouch, it is almost like she is beckoning me to listen. The music abruptly pulls us in with a distorted, oscillating synth sound - the police car drowns deeper and deeper until we get to the final scene where Beyonce also becomes submerged under the water. She looks like she is being baptised and this could signify rebirth and a new era. This music video remains etched in my mind. But what relevance does the on-screen portrayal of Black lives in the US have to a Black British seventeen-year-old girl growing up in South London?

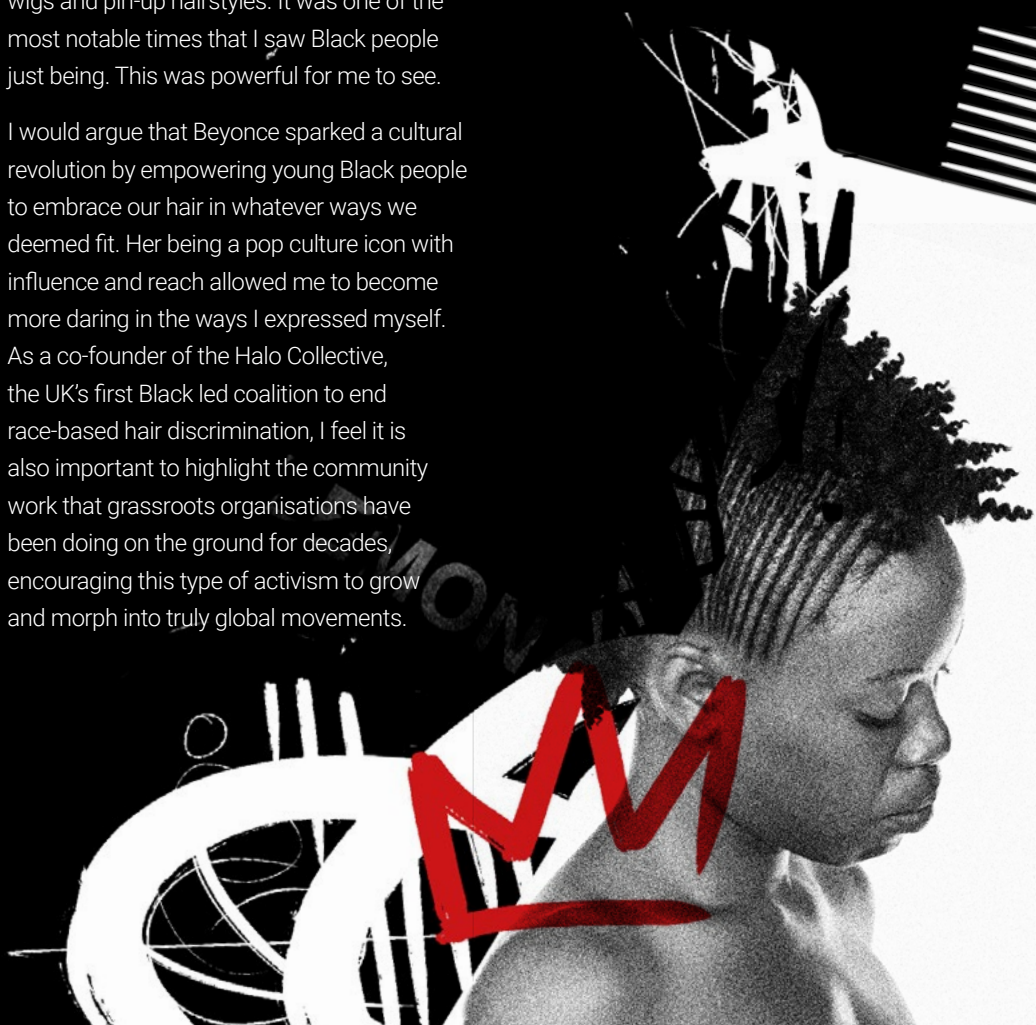
Like any normal teenager, I was worrying about growing up, concerts and house parties. It was also around this time that I started to experiment with my natural hair and with makeup. I was trying out different hairstyles (an afro, twists, braids) and I was trying out bold lip colours (pinks, purples, and greens). However, one thing that stood out for me in this era was the lack of products to cater for my complexion. So, I started to find groups on Tumblr and Facebook which had a direct focus on hair and makeup for Black women, Non-binary and Trans folk. We would share tips on where to find darker shade ranges, and products with the correct undertones. I owe all my hair and makeup knowledge to these groups and forums I found myself in.

As I was going through this journey of self discovery, wider society was also

going through a reckoning. A reckoning I would say was brought to the forefront by Beyonce's critically acclaimed studio album *Lemonade*. The visuals for *Formation* were bold and daring in a way that I hadn't seen before. Not only was she addressing social issues pertaining to Black lives but she was also portraying us in mainstream media in ways that I had never seen before.

Beyonce being a global icon meant that her portrayal of us was easily accessible in the UK through social media and it became apparent that there were similarities between the Black British and the African American experience. One of the effects of systemic racism in both the UK and the US presented itself as the negative portrayal of Black culture in mainstream media and the suppression of the myriad ways we express ourselves through our various cultures. I saw Black women on my screen with intricate braids - that would later be coined 'lemonade braids' - bright blue wigs and pin-up hairstyles. It was one of the most notable times that I saw Black people just being. This was powerful for me to see.

I would argue that Beyonce sparked a cultural revolution by empowering young Black people to embrace our hair in whatever ways we deemed fit. Her being a pop culture icon with influence and reach allowed me to become more daring in the ways I expressed myself. As a co-founder of the Halo Collective, the UK's first Black led coalition to end race-based hair discrimination, I feel it is also important to highlight the community work that grassroots organisations have been doing on the ground for decades, encouraging this type of activism to grow and morph into truly global movements.



## The mainstreaming of gaming culture

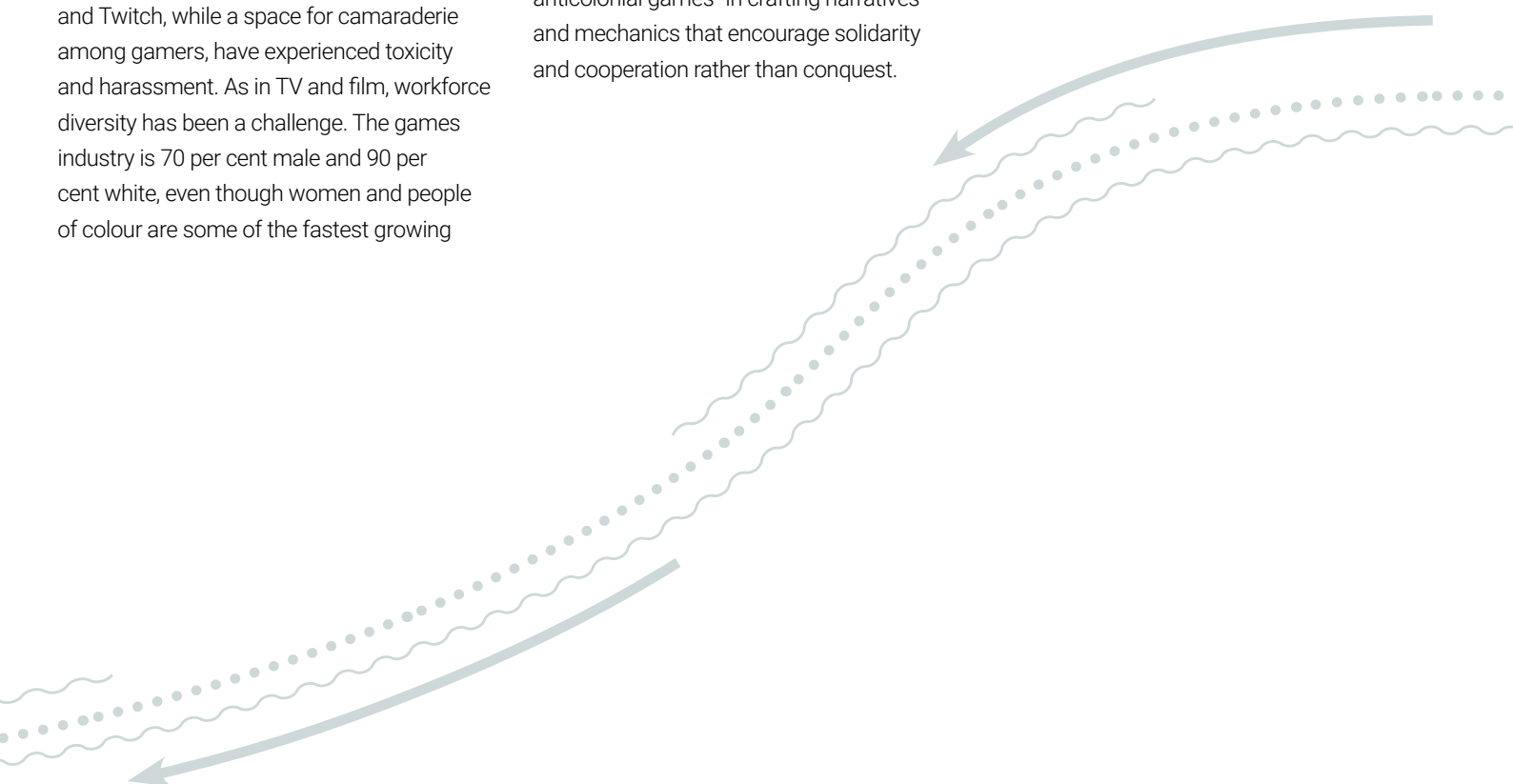
[2.5 billion people](#) actively play video games. That is nearly a third of the global population glued to gaming consoles, mobile phones and computer screens. While often perceived as niche, gaming has outpaced (and outgrossed) music, sports and the film industry to become [emblematic of today's youth culture](#).

The reach and influence of these spaces has not gone unnoticed among celebrities, politicians and corporate brands. A livestream of US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [playing Among Us](#) ahead of the presidential elections was viewed on Twitch by 439,000 people simultaneously, the third highest record on the platform. With music venues shut down and tours cancelled due to Covid-19, musicians like Travis Scott and Lil Nas X hosted performances within multiplayer games like *Fortnite*, drawing millions in audiences. And fashion brands like Balenciaga and Louis Vuitton have partnered with development studios to produce gaming aesthetic jackets, clothing and other "[gamerbait](#)".

While games are enjoyed by everyone, [gaming culture](#) has not always been accessible to all. Gamers, developers, streamers and critics from marginalised backgrounds have had to contend with abuse online and offline. Social media platforms like Discord, Reddit and Twitch, while a space for camaraderie among gamers, have experienced toxicity and harassment. As in TV and film, workforce diversity has been a challenge. The games industry is 70 per cent male and 90 per cent white, even though women and people of colour are some of the fastest growing

demographics among gamers. This lack of diversity in the industry bleeds into the games produced, where queer, Black, trans or disabled protagonists are still a rarity.

Despite the challenges, a magnitude of positive changes have swept across gaming driven by years of pressure from movements inside and outside of the industry. Major publishers are investing in immersive blockbuster games that develop multidimensional characters who are queer, trans or Black and resist tired tropes. *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* features a young Black-Puerto Rican superhero finding his way in Harlem, while Ellie, a young queer woman surviving in a post-apocalyptic US drives the narrative in *The Last of Us Part II*. [Borderlands 3](#) released the expansion pack *Guns, Loves and Tentacles* featuring the first major gay marriage storyline. Expansive accessibility options, which are increasingly becoming the norm, are allowing more people, regardless of ability, to play games. Indie studios like Brass Lion Entertainment, Silver Rain Games and Outerloop Games are building diversity, inclusion and work-life balance into their ethos, while developing games that investigate systemic racism or challenge colonial narratives. In *Decolonising gaming* (p. 27), critic Carolyn Petit explores the promise of "expressly anticolonial games" in crafting narratives and mechanics that encourage solidarity and cooperation rather than conquest.



# DECOLONISING GAMING

BY CAROLYN PETIT

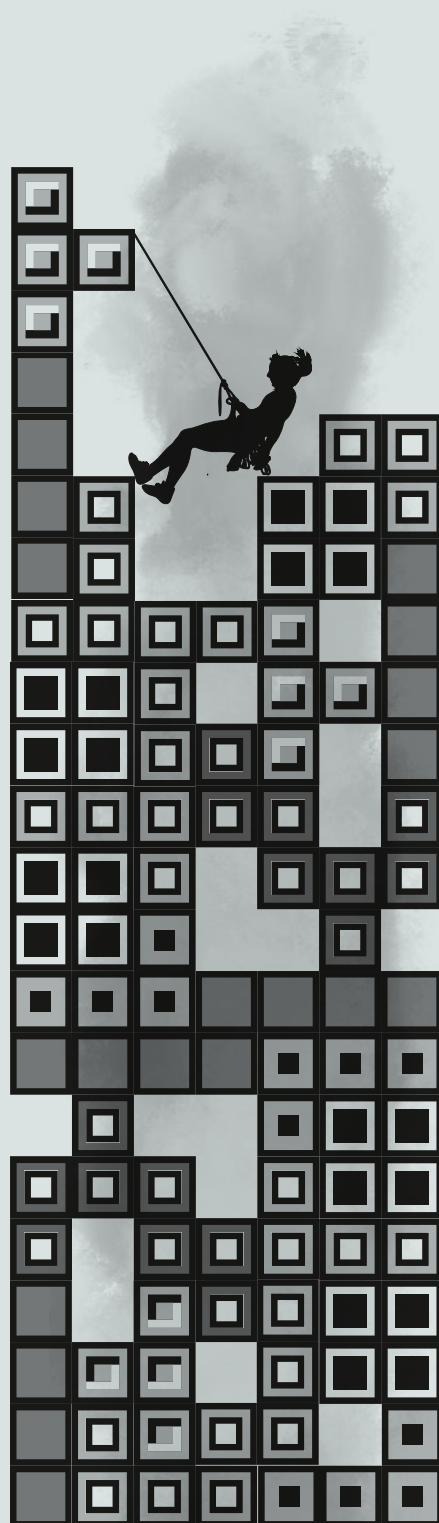
In 1985, I remember playing *Super Mario Bros*, heroically leaping for a flagpole at the end of each stage, tearing down the banner of the evil King Koopa and claiming the little castle nearby as my own. Such colonial narratives have been so ubiquitous and ordinary in my experience as a player that it would be decades before I even noticed or questioned them. In turn-based strategy games, I earned victory by conquering nations with my military might. In open-world action games, my heroes claimed cities district by district, overthrowing one ruler just to institute another. In science-fiction games, I visited planets that existed just for me to harvest their natural resources for profit. ☐ Plenty of games don't position players as conquerors. However, it's only recently that artists have begun innovating around the idea of expressly anticolonial games — ones with narratives and mechanics that encourage players to align in solidarity against legacies of conquest and colonialism rather than reward them for it. ☐

The text-based 2014 game *80 Days* proves that a fresh lens can put an anticolonial spin on even the most familiar narrative and gaming tropes. Based on Jules Verne's 1872 novel *Around the World in 80 Days*, the game casts players as Jean Passepartout, valet to English adventurer Phileas Fogg, whose decisions determine Fogg's route as he attempts to circumvent the globe in 80 days. Verne's novel is far from an anticolonial text. As *80 Days*' London-based lead writer Meghna Jayanth said of Verne's book [in a 2014 interview](#), "it's about two white guys and their incredibly important journey around the world—other cultures, other people, they're just set dressing for this narrative of white male heroism."

Jayanth, however, dramatically reimagines Verne's story through a steampunk makeover and shift in political dynamics. "If you're inventing a world," she said, "why not make it more progressive? Why not have women invent half the technologies and pilot half the airships? Why not have a strong automaton-using Zulu Federation avert the Scramble for Africa? History is full of women and people of colour and queer people and minorities." In *80 Days*, those "other cultures" feel less like set-dressing from Verne's novel and more like the lifeblood of the story. It's their world, Fogg and Passepartout are just passing through.

While indie games are vital, 2019's *Death Stranding* offers a glimpse of what big-budget anticolonial games could look like. In the game, players are couriers in a post-cataclysm North America where people live in isolation and delivery service is their only lifeline. The game's mechanics encourage cooperation between players: pooling resources to build roads, ziplines and tools to make it easier for everyone delivering items people need. There is no sense of domination or drive to harvest the world's resources for profit. Rather, the joy of the game comes from working together to link people who have been left isolated by crisis.

There is untapped potential in gaming as an artistic medium. If game designers eschew old stories and notions of victory that rely on sucking worlds dry to build armies or taking over cities piece by piece, they can design gameplay systems and craft narratives in which victory is found not in conquest, but in connection, community and living in harmony with the world.



### 3. POWER: POP CULTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF NARRATIVE POWER

In *Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond*, Sir Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder MBE put forth a proposition for the entertainment industry. It is time to move beyond conversations around better representation and start talking about power: “[This world must now look at practical ways to actively empower anyone who feels on the outside of the ‘golden circle’ whether they’re Black, Brown, female, disabled, gay, trans — even if they live outside of London ...this is about all of us having a seat at the table — not just a privileged few.](#)”

Pop culture, as with all media, has a two-way relationship with power. On the one hand, power structures within cultural and entertainment industries dictate who is able to write, produce and access resources to create stories. These often reflect existing power dynamics within society, from institutional racism and systemic misogyny to the impacts of austerity and [stagnant social mobility](#) on working-class people. Yet, culture not only reflects the world around us but is active in creating it. “Television does not hold up a mirror to the nation and world,” [writes](#) scholar Beth Johnson, “but rather shapes audience expectations, beliefs and norms” that society lives by. In social movements, this has been referred to as narrative power — the idea that the stories, images, films, games and media we produce and interact are embedded with power. As such, they define whose voices are worth listening to, whose lives matter and what we imagine is possible for society.

In this section, we grapple with pop culture through this dual lens of structural and narrative power. Through interviews, conversations and first person accounts from critics and creators, we explore ways that power could be shared more equally across film, television and gaming industries. Meanwhile, we look to social movements for examples of how to use positive pop culture representations to build narrative power. By doing so, we can unlock opportunities and potential that we could not have even imagined before.





### 3.1 THE POWER TO CREATE

In 2020, SIGN and Candour Productions launched [Industry Voices](#), a series of filmed testimonials with professionals in the entertainment industry. In it, game developers, TV producers, filmmakers and comedians from diverse backgrounds shared their experiences of discrimination which stifled their creative work. Comedian Sideman emphasised the pressure to walk into a room and “put on a white voice” and noted how much further along his career would be if he had a “London accent”. Screenwriter Lisa Holdsworth said people don’t consider “regional work to be real work,” and she is often underestimated because of her northern accent. And documentary filmmaker Sean McAllister noted that the “working-class” label follows you throughout the industry.

Many of these structural issues were shared in Michaela Coel’s 2018 MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival. Coel was the first Black woman to give the lecture in its 42-year history. In it she [said](#): “New writers aren’t often made executive producers in the UK I understand, ‘that’s the way it is’, that we’re not experienced enough to know the budgets, so when and how do we become more experienced?”

As statements by Coel, McAllister, Holdsworth and Sideman reveal, it is difficult for anyone who is not middle-class and white to [get a foothold](#) in the UK entertainment industries. Once they do, their lived experiences, expertise and power to create is called into question. As an actor, showrunner, writer and director, Coel has had to repeatedly push back against industry tides of “that’s the way it is” to [retain](#) creative control and ownership over her work.

While Coel’s recent series *I May Destroy You* has been lauded by [critics](#) as a groundbreaking exploration of consent and depiction of [Black British](#) life in London, it would not have been possible without the freedom to create on her own terms, through her own lens of lived experience as a [survivor of sexual violence](#), as a Black woman, as an East Londoner, as the child of immigrants and as an artist. Coel herself noted: “I like to feel like I’m immersed in the story. Not just standing out here telling a story about those people over there. I like to be inside of the narrative and then step

out.” As such, her approach is informed and intersectional, refusing to shy away from questions of race, gender, sexuality and class.

This shift in gaze had an immense impact on audience perception. GQ writer Reggie Yates, [said during an interview](#), “*I May Destroy You* is probably the first time in forever that I see a London I recognise. To see white working-class kids playing side by side with the children of immigrants, all using the same slang, dancing to the same Afrobeats record.”

Nathalie McDermott, chief executive of On Road Media, an organisation working to improve media coverage of misrepresented groups, noted in an interview for this report how critical this shift is in talking about sexual violence: “[Stories about sexual abuse in popular culture are usually told from the perspective of the onlooker, imagining the horrors, focusing on the trauma of the act itself and the evil of the perpetrator. In \*I May Destroy You\*, Coel was given complete free reign and you can tell. Every single inch of it is survivor informed. She’s a survivor and a creative — she understands this space so it was going to ring true and instead of leaving audiences viewing a survivor as ‘other’, we are with her throughout her journey. It’s not about the big moment in court — that success or failure in the justice system. Or about seeing the person abused and then broken. It’s about looking at the reality of how we all process and deal with trauma.](#)”

This immersive, multidimensional storytelling, especially when related to social issues, is possible when those with lived experience have the freedom to retain creative control. In *ROCKS* (2019), a coming of age film about a Black British teenager and her group of friends, the filmmakers actively involved the young cast of mostly first-time actors in the creative and script-writing process from the very beginning.

Not only did this approach centre a youth gaze that was critical to the success of the film (adults rarely appear, and when they do, they tend to be a hindrance to resolving conflicts), but it helped flatten the power hierarchy so prevalent in the creative industries. [Anu Henriques](#), associate director of *ROCKS*, said in a media interview: “[There’s a real issue](#)

[in the industry of recognition of labour and recognition of expertise... What I hope is that the film, alongside all the other conversations around the narrative and themes, will also spark a conversation about how creatives and how storytellers are credited in those spaces. I hope that, in the future, we can find ways to be even more accurate in the crediting, whether that means being credited as a collective...](#)”

Such radical approaches to creative control set precedents and push boundaries for what we can expect from pop culture. In *Reflections on Black youth culture* (pp. 31-32), Marcus Ryder MBE and producer Angela Ferreira discuss editorial control and what it means for Black communities to tell stories on their own terms within mainstream platforms.

Ensuring that people from all walks of life have the power to create means making tools to do so widely available. In the games industry, there has been a rise in mentorship and training programmes curated for women, people of colour and those who identify as LGBTQ+. Karla Reyes, product manager at the company Square Enix, said in an interview for this report: “[We need to show that this is a viable career path, because there is a lack of education around opportunities within the games industry as well as immense socio-economic barriers that prevent people of colour from pursuing careers in creative sectors. The industry needs to provide Black creatives and creatives of colour with more training and experience, so that they have the tools to make games and share their diverse stories and perspectives. Many studios may perceive hiring individuals with little game dev experience as risky, but that risk could be converted into more opportunities and consequently, rewards, if they realise the value of publishing content for underserved audiences.](#)”

## Case Study:

### *Insecure: The Come Up Game*

"Unleash your inner rap star," beckons your phone screen, and step into the shoes of Issa Rae, star of *Insecure*, the HBO comedy drama.

For Karla Reyes, product manager at Square Enix, a minigame where you can rap to yourself and feel empowered was one of the most relatable parts of the new mobile game *Insecure: The Come Up Game*. In 2019, through Code Coven's Unity bootcamp, Reyes joined an all-women team from across the UK, US, South America, Asia and Europe that helped develop its first prototypes.

"This game, which was created by under-represented developers for under-represented audiences, shows what is possible when we reduce the barriers for gamers from marginalised backgrounds to enter the games industry," Reyes said. "We need to show that this is a viable career

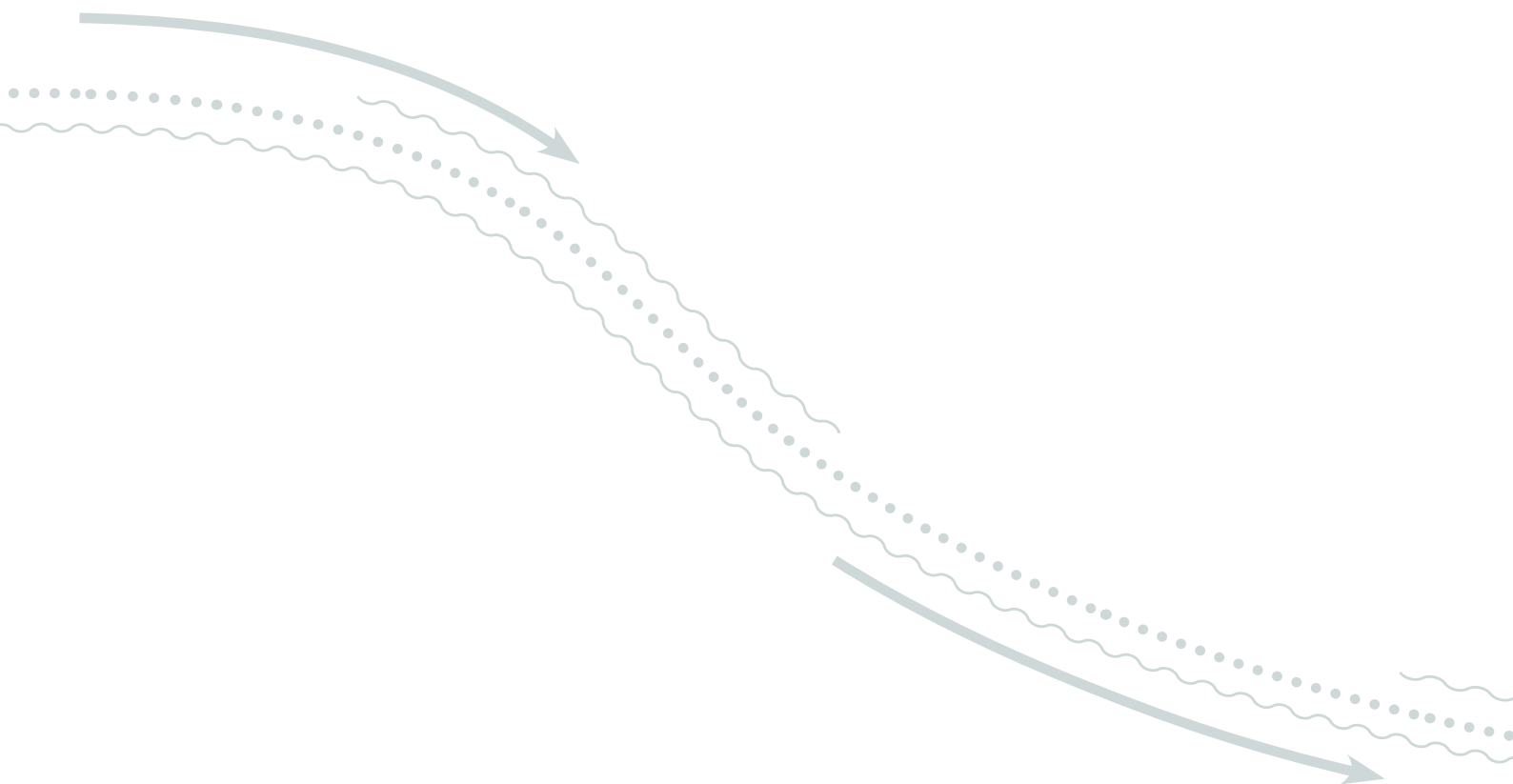
path, because there is a lack of education around opportunities within the games industry and immense socio-economic barriers that prevent people of colour from pursuing careers in creative sectors."

Mitu Khandaker, CEO of Glow Up, the tech studio behind the game, [emphasised](#) in a *Teen Vogue* interview, "[It's time that games did things differently and lifted up more Black and Brown women — as both playable characters and behind the scenes, as developers.](#)"

Reyes wears many hats that allow her to push for more diversity and diverse content within the games industry. As the head of business development for Code Coven, an education platform and online accelerator for marginalised communities, she and the team were well-positioned to support when Covid-19 hit. Reyes said, "During the pandemic, lots of jobs, internships and

conferences were being cancelled. We created the GDC Relief Fund Accelerator — in partnerships with Wings Interactive — to fill that gap for indie game developers." In 2020 alone, Code Coven supported over 100 developers (over 70 per cent women and over 70 per cent people of colour) through their courses and accelerators, engaging sponsors and mentors from big game companies, including Riot, Mediatonic, Niantic, Facebook and Google.

At the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings, Code Coven launched a scholarship fund for students of colour to attend their Intro to Game Making Course online. Reyes also co-founded Square Enix RED (Racial and Ethnic Diversity), an employee resource group at Square Enix West and helped launch the BAME in Games Mentorship Programme.



# REFLECTIONS ON BLACK YOUTH CULTURE

## IN CONVERSATION WITH MARCUS RYDER MBE AND ANGELA FERREIRA

**Marcus Ryder:** I know popular, youth-orientated television is an area that you have worked in for years, but for a long time it was something I struggled with, even when I was a lot younger. I take so much pride in Black people's influence on popular culture, but for me it is an uneasy relationship. It is a pride that I almost want to celebrate privately because I don't know how to celebrate it without falling into fulfilling stereotypes that we are just great singers and dancers and athletes.

How do you navigate Black representation in youth and popular culture while feeling you are not fulfilling stereotypes? I see you achieve it all the time. Maybe I am no longer a "youth" and have some distance from youth culture that I now feel more comfortable in addressing these types of issues and programmes.

**Angela Ferreira:** I'm interested in your dilemma with the way youth culture was and is often represented. I feel that is because the portrayal we see most is of a very narrow set of repetitive images that don't allow for the full array of talent to be shown. Music is particularly problematic, as the regular story is often booty-shaking, half-naked Hip Hoppers or Grime Gangers, ignoring that we are also trendsetters and trailblazers in our contribution to Pop, Rock and Classical music.

I have always tried to ensure that we are shown as completely and as fully as possible. So in music and youth programmes, a mix is essential and sometimes that may be in a critical as well as a celebratory tone. It also means widening the contributions that we are seen to be making across culture such as in fashion, books, theatre and film. This can be extremely challenging as we know. The reinforcement of negative stereotypes and the trauma narrative is pervasive. I can't deny that conversations and actions have at times been very wearing, but I feel a deep sense of responsibility to stand my ground and not let us be lumped into a homogeneous box.

The reasons for this may go back to my own youth. I had a lot of different interests - I loved ballet and reggae and pop equally. I was a voracious book reader and the telly was always there. If I was comfortable with so many disparate activities then there was nothing wrong with the audience getting this same eclectic mix. The feedback has usually been one of appreciation.

Now, young people have social media to show themselves as talented, complex, artistic, clever, or whatever they choose. It is how we all harness that positively that we need to work out going forward.



**Marcus Ryder:** Do you think your white colleagues and commissioners understand this burden of responsibility?

When I was in Scotland, it was so interesting to see many of my Scottish colleagues push against stereotypical representations of kilts, bagpipes and haggis, while at the same time taking immense pride in all three aspects of their culture (and more). The difference, I think, was one of control. Privately, they were very comfortable with all these signifiers of their culture. But the minute it was broadcast across the UK-wide network, they often lost control of how that imagery was used and how it would be interpreted.

I am reminded of the time I produced a current affairs phone-in for Choice FM in the 1990s that mainly tackled Black issues. The perception (erroneous, I might add) was that the entire audience was Black. It felt like a private conversation between friends. As such we were able to discuss the most contentious issues and sometimes even play with “negative” stereotypes, and the listener would go with us. At the same time, if I had written the same script for the BBC, I don’t think the Black audience would have been so forgiving, let alone enjoy it.

While I agree with you that presenting a full, rounded picture of Black life is vital, I think there are also issues around perceived editorial control and knowing who the audience is. No one wants their dirty linen washed in public, even if you place our crown jewels next to it (if that tortured metaphor makes any sense).

**Angela Ferreira:** Let me address your initial point of white colleagues and commissioners feeling the burden of responsibility. The short answer is no. There is a lot more awareness in the last few months, and open discussion which is good. However, every person in an organisation (no matter the business) has to adhere to its ethos and leadership, and it is very difficult to go against that. Those who do usually have their careers shortened. So, we are now in a better place where conversations about portrayal and shared responsibility appear to be on the rise - but let’s pick this up in a year, see how it plays out and if there has been positive change.

On editorial control: truthfully we have very little. Partly because we don’t have the numbers, but mainly because we don’t have the outlets. I’m interested that you chose to mention “washing dirty linen” as I think our linen is washed far too often, but not by us. We don’t see a broad and equal spread of Black life. I’ve rarely seen a young Black man depicted as at university despite all my youngsters having been through higher education. I’ve often seen him in jail, though I don’t know anyone in that position. And I’m sure that it is the same for you. I’d love to see many more aspirational images such as the type that we have seen in US drama. These people exist in the UK. We know them. We are them. Let’s show them.

This doesn’t mean that we should be culturally washed-out and assimilated in an unrealistic way. Michelin-starred cuisine is not incompatible with Jollof or Rice ‘n’ Peas in representation terms. That is why it is so vital that we tell our stories on our terms - then the washed linen will at least be authentic.



## 3.2 THE POWER OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

*"Everyone is clear that culture has power. But only when we organise and coordinate that power can we achieve the depth and scale of cultural change we need."*

**Bridgit Antoinette Evans, chief executive officer, Pop Culture Collaborative**

Progressive social movements are instrumental in organising cultural power as Bridgit Antoinette Evans states. Not only do art and culture raise awareness about social issues among mass audiences, but they stretch our imagination to what is collectively possible. They make, as Black feminist filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara said, "the revolution irresistible".

Historically, art and culture have served as tools for building solidarity and influencing social norms. In the 1960s, an artistic exchange between the Black Panthers and Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, positioned art and culture as central to anti-colonial and liberatory politics, and birthed the militant aesthetic of Zapantera Negra. "Free Nelson Mandela" posters became a symbol of South Africa's [anti-apartheid movement](#) countering government propaganda, while documentary films served as tools for local political education. Music has long been central to anti-racist organising from US Civil Rights movement legends Nina Simone and Billie Holiday to [Britain's Rock](#)

[Against Racism](#) movement of the 1970s.

Today, groups driving social movements are including cultural organising and collaborations with entertainment industries as a core part of their strategies. From small industry collaborations to large-scale social impact campaigns, below are several case studies from the UK, US, Mexico and Europe, exploring film, fashion, gaming, awards shows and theatre. For a deep-dive into spoken word as a vehicle for social and political change, read *Creating a 'third place'* (p. 36) *to control our narratives* by poet Aneesha Hussain of the Khidr collective.

### Case Study:

### Black Lives Matter

"What happened in 2020 has been massive. Black Lives Matter has created more ripples in the broadcasting industry than anything prior to that. Organisations in coming years will be judged on two things: how they responded to Black Lives Matter and how they responded to Covid-19," said one source in an interview for this report.

After the Black Lives Matter uprisings in June 2020, network television, broadcasters, film industry bodies, game studios and cultural institutions released solidarity statements and commitments to becoming "anti-racist" or more "diverse". While some were [critiqued](#) as seeking out positive PR, many organisations already working to promote diversity in entertainment saw an opportunity to advance change. "Organisations like Code Coven, POC in Play and BAME in Games existed before the recent resurgence of the BLM movement, yet their impact and importance became amplified," said Karla Reyes, head of business development for Code Coven. "More people are starting to listen. With the rapid growth of the games industry, especially in reaching broader audiences during the pandemic, now is the most opportune time to turn the tide."

Chella Ramanan, game designer and co-founder of POC in Play, an organisation working to increase representation of people of colour in the games industry has emphasised, "After the uprisings, there has been more interest in Black History Month across the board, from gaming panels around diversity to a push for 'Black pound day' and encouraging people to buy from Black-owned businesses. This has in large part been driven by Black people themselves. The impact is huge and global."

As Chella Ramanan signals, Black History Month in the UK and the US became a lynchpin moment for recent collaboration between movement organisations and the creative industries. In the US, Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) launched Black Futures Month in 2021 and produced a [short afrofuturist film](#) in collaboration with Root Story Films. Shanelle Matthews, communications director at M4BL, commented on the impact: "We are making the world every day. *Black Futures: An Ode to Freedom Summer* is a portal to the future; a creative way to capture the imagination and remember that the past, present and future are interconnected." In the US, organiser and designer Fresco Steez partnered with [Levi's](#) to create original designs that "honour

the deep legacy of Black political struggle," as well as pay tribute to the millions of people who went out into the streets to take action in defence of Black lives.

On the industry side, creatives, filmmakers and game developers have looked to social movements for inspiration. Steve McQueen has [announced](#) the production of a new BBC documentary about the Black Power movement, using archival footage from both the US and the UK. In the superhero adventure game *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, released by Insomniac, players find a Black Lives Matter mural after finishing all of their side quests and missions. While the New York City-set game has been critiqued for not addressing police violence head-on (instead, opting to almost erase police presence), it is possibly the first public recognition of Black Lives Matter in a video game, especially one this major.

As game critic Mike Scholans [writes](#): "To be a Black fan of comics, you have to calibrate your expectations on the low end and expect to deal with stereotypes and gaffes from even your most beloved creators. I truly didn't expect Miles Morales to approach even half of the issues it broaches, ending on a note that I can only describe as a celebration (and lowkey analysis) of Black excellence in several forms. It's not perfect, but it's something."

## Case Study:

### Roma for the Oscar

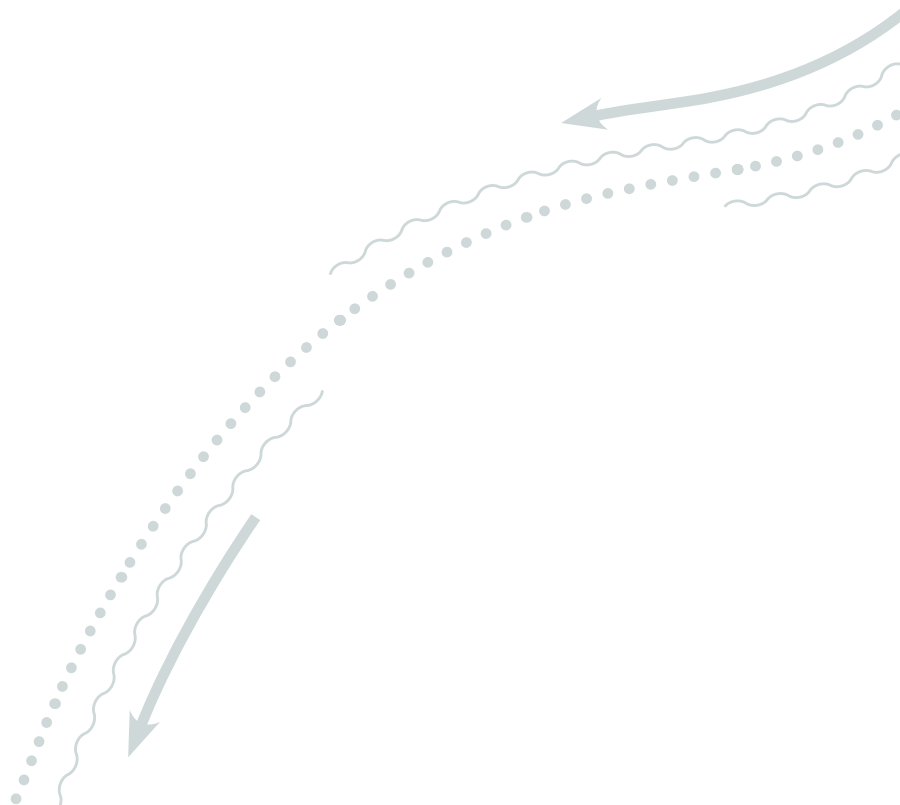
In August 2018, Ai-jen Poo, executive director of National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), Kristina Mevs-Apgar, director of culture change at NDWA and domestic worker organiser attended the 75th Venice International Film Festival as the guests of director Alfonso Cuarón. That moment kicked off a social impact campaign to use the power of the film *Roma* and the Hollywood Awards season to bring recognition to fight for domestic workers' rights. The premier of *Roma*, which featured the story of an indigenous domestic worker named Cleo as the main protagonist in a black and white Spanish and Mixtec-language film, became an unprecedented opportunity in film and pop culture for the domestic workers' movement in the US and Mexico.

The social impact campaign was guided by NDWA and Participant Media and included a strategy to screen the film for as many domestic workers across the country as possible. In Mexico, the campaign was led by domestic workers'

union Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar under the leadership of Marcelina Bautista. *Roma* came with many firsts, including the first Mexican indigenous actress to be nominated for an Oscar (first-time actress Yalitza Aparicio) and the first Netflix-streamed film to win an Oscar.

In the US, NDWA sought to strategically frame the [conversation](#) around domestic work and [women's solidarity across class](#). These efforts were complemented by spikes of publicity to frame the dialogue during key moments, including the [2018 Netflix premiere](#), the [2019 Golden Globes](#) and the [2019 Oscar Watch Party](#). NDWA sought out opportunities for domestic workers to share their own lived experiences on their own terms in high profile media outlets, while lifting up innovative solutions to some of the challenges *Roma* brought to the surface.

According to Ishita Srivastava, director of culture change at [Caring Across Generations](#), a US-based organisation transforming the narrative around care, the *Roma* campaign was not only a direct intervention to center domestic workers in public discourse, but was an effort to frame "care as a collective issue". This framing became even more accelerated during Covid-19. "Based on some early polling, and what we've seen in conversations in the media, it seems like people are starting to think much more about care as a collective issue and social responsibility rather than just an individual, personal burden for people to bear," said Srivastava. "But we are not convinced this is going to be sustained past this crisis point. The next step is to cement this important narrative shift, and the next five years will be crucial. We need to ask people: do you remember what it felt like when the wellbeing of your mother was contingent on her neighbour? Do you remember what it was like for your health to be dependent on the next person's? We are very connected in our need for care. We need to think of care as a public good that requires collective solutions."



## Case Study:

### #MeToo & TIME'S UP

#MeToo produced one of the most powerful movement and industry collaborations in recent history. In October 2017, actors Ashley Judd and Alyssa Milano broke open the Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment allegations. One month later, farmworker women with the support of activist Mónica Ramírez wrote a [letter of solidarity](#) to women in Hollywood, laying the foundation for TIME'S UP as a movement against sexual harassment. The following year, two of the largest entertainment protests took place. Wearing all black, actors like Laura Dern and Meryl Streep invited social movement leaders to the 2018 Golden Globes red carpet, refocusing press questions from fashion to organising. A month later, actors staged a similar protest at the [2019 BAFTA Awards](#).

Social movements like #MeToo play a key role in cementing cultural shifts. The impact of #MeToo is still reverberating today, most recently, in the [video game industry](#). In the US, this was possible, in large part, due to [decades of groundwork](#) laid by Black women and women of colour activists fighting sexual harassment, including Anita Hill and Tarana Burke. In the UK, it has been led by organisations like Imkaan, which centre the experiences of women of colour and migrant women in the fight to end violence against women. Black feminist activist and former executive director of Imkaan, Marai Larasi, attended the 2018 Golden Globes with Emma Watson and was instrumental in influencing the direction of TIME'S UP UK.

Various cultural productions served as inspirations for the movement and other feminist organising campaigns.

For example, aesthetics from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel where few women have control over their bodies, became a common sight at US and European protests in support of reproductive rights and against sexual violence.

The impact of these movements has been tremendous, according to Kristina Mevs-Appar, director of culture change at the National Domestic Workers Alliance, "The industry has gone through a major series of reckonings that have started to open up space to talk about structural change, accountability, hiring practices and content production. TIME'S UP has had wins in Hollywood, including agencies committing to 50/50 gender parity on boards. Still, between press releases and promises, the numbers are not showing major changes have been made. Only time will tell if the impact of these movements will lead to greater inclusion in rooms of power, as well as more diverse content."

## Case Study:

### Windrush and migrants' rights

In the UK, organisations have creatively used pop culture to challenge stereotypes about migrants and refugees, often as a counterbalance to sensationalist news during crisis moments. In 2018, it became public that the British government under Theresa May had wrongfully detained and deported hundreds of Commonwealth citizens. The Windrush scandal led to public outrage, overwhelming support for Windrush generation migrants and raised public consciousness about the harmful and continued impact of the UK government's racist and discriminatory 'hostile environment policy' towards migrants.

This 'crisis' moment led to an outpouring of artistic interventions. The Leeds-based Phoenix Dance Theatre put on [Windrush: Movement of the People](#), the

first contemporary dance work to explore the narrative of the arrival of SS Empire Windrush. The performance toured to sell-out auditoriums and was broadcast on BBC Four. With support from Stuart Hall Foundation, Nubian GLU and Showpatrol. TV created a 1960s style Reminiscence Room in Shepherd's Bush, London to help members of the Windrush generation living with dementia to trigger comforting memories. [Windrush Tales](#), a forthcoming narrative text adventure set in the 1950s and created by designers Chella Ramanan and Corey Brotherson, seeks to celebrate Caribbean migrant culture, while exposing subtle, everyday experiences of racism.

Gaming, in particular, brings an important element of interactivity and problem-solving to social issues. Marcia Chandra, PopChange Producer at Counterpoints

Arts reflected, "Gaming has enormous potential for social change impact in the context of migration, not only in its unique immersive form of storytelling, but in the opportunities of engaging with one of the fastest growing communities of pop culture consumers. Through the simple act of centring yourself in a character and actively making choices, games have an incredible power for empathy, social connection and expanding world-views."

PopChange at Counterpoints Arts has built relationships with indie designers [producing](#) award-winning games that challenge dominant narratives of migration and displacement. These include games like *Papers, Please* where the player faces moral quandaries as a border guard, and *Bury Me, My Love*, a text-based mobile game where you follow the path of a Syrian refugee woman.

# CREATING A 'THIRD PLACE' TO CONTROL OUR NARRATIVES

BY ANEESHA HUSSAIN, KHIDR COLLECTIVE

The hustle and bustle of school lunchtimes always provided a moment of relief for students at my high school. For those who were part of Globe Poets, the spoken word poetry club that my friends and I ran, it was the chance to slip away and do something we loved. I remember congregating in the classroom - it was a space for all, from the shy girls to the self-proclaimed 'trappers'. They'd sit up on the tables, puffer coats on, drafting poems in the Memo app on their phones, mumbling along to the latest Harlem Spartans track with one earphone in. Others would watch video performances of their favourite poets on repeat, pausing every few lines to clap and shout as if they were at a live reading. School gave me some of my most vivid memories of spoken word poetry, making me realise how it can be a powerful pedagogical tool used to support our communities.

For many Muslim students, we had few opportunities to explore aspects of our identity, such as race, faith and class, without feeling like a 'cause for concern'. With government [Prevent policies](#) and news stories of young people being radicalised, it wasn't paranoid to feel that certain staff members and the school police officer were keeping an eye on us. We were vocal about the situation of Muslims around the world, often discussing topics from police brutality to Palestine. It was through spoken word that we were able to frame the world and interrogate our own thoughts and feelings in a restricted school environment.

Like in any inner London school, many of us came from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, but we felt that we had an opportunity to showcase our own voices the way we knew best - through poetry, rap,

music. We were inspired by the poets and performers carving the way for us, such as Caleb Femi, Shay D and Akala, all of whom have subsequently supported us in different capacities. I clearly remember watching Akala's hip-hop adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard II* thinking, 'I wish we were taught like this in class'. It was then that I realised spoken word allows young people to dream but also achieve educational goals by giving us what the curriculum fails to - a voice and agency.

Spoken word can inspire young people to call for social and political change as they step into the roles of future leaders, activists and organisers. In recent years, much of London has been hit with rapid gentrification and many students from my school were able to express their frustrations and start conversations about its impact on working-class groups. When young people use spoken word as a method of understanding the world around them, it can bridge gaps between their school life, social life and community.

After leaving school, I understood that it wasn't that young people did not have anything to say or stories to tell, but that we did not have the means to do so. Without representation in arts and media, our stories would never be heard. I began to question why our voices were not loud and present in creative spaces.

In recent years, ground-breaking work has taken place for greater diversity in the publishing industry and I wanted to be a part of this. I joined the Khidr Collective - which aims to platform the work of Muslims - as a poetry editor. Working on a zine appealed enormously as it gave us the power to control how our voices are presented and understood. This was important for our



communities, as more often than not, we are plagued by news of gang violence, knife crime, failing schools, and even radicalisation and extremism. We spoke in a unified voice, but we also had different stories to tell.

Zines can be an active, direct solution to media misrepresentation of Muslims - a unique, grassroots form that cultivates the personal and healing elements of art. A zine demands artists and writers return to the basics and think about the impact they want their work to have in their community.

In the cross-section between poetry and zines, it is possible to create a 'third space' for communities to reflect, imagine, build inclusivity and control their own narratives. The popularity of spoken word has risen and allows poets to centre themselves in our world. Many of our identities are inherently politicised, especially within faith groups, so it is important to be able to influence how we are being represented.

As much as spoken word is about voice and performance, it also requires individuals to be listeners. Those active in the arts need to listen and understand the stories, experiences and histories within our communities but also between them. Spoken word can give people the freedom to reclaim and rewrite their narratives in a world where it feels increasingly difficult to do so.



### 3.3. BUILDING POWER TOGETHER

*"As a woman and a Black person, it was really hard to break into the games industry. I was used to being the only Black woman at an event. There is an ivory tower approach that exists in these creative industries. Less than two per cent of the global videogames industry identifies as Black so this is an incredible opportunity to recognise talent from multiple disciplines and experience levels."*

**Chella Ramanan, co-founder, POC in Play**

At the start of this section, we chose to address power head-on — and the variety of ways in which it manifests. Power also exists as a relational force. Changing the status quo in the creative and entertainment industries means changing the way we relate to each other as friends, colleagues and allies. Many of our interviewees reflected on these dynamics within workplaces and industry networks:

*"One of the big challenges is that the games industry is still not considered as a viable career option despite the fact the revenue generated by the industry in the last few years has exceeded the film, TV and music industry combined! The industry finds it difficult to reach out to parents, teachers, mentors, guardians, career advisers and even the media that heavily influence, or in many cases decide, the career a young person will pursue. Such perception just amplifies when an individual comes from an ethnic minority background or just a minority as far as that industry goes."*

**Kish Hirani, chair, BAME in Games**

*"It is key for leadership to have buy-in when it comes to diversity and inclusion. At Square Enix, our mobile team is predominantly women with many identifying as LGBTQ+. The team supports my advocacy work with Code Coven outside of the company and that makes a big difference."*

**Karla Reyes, Code Coven**

Tapping the power of allyship has been one approach to sharing power more equally in the workplace. As Sir Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder MBE write in *Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond* "If we want to create a culture where people are not scared to speak their truth, we need to create a culture of allies. If you are a Black man, you need to support your female coworker when she is calling out sexism. If you are a white woman, support your Black co-workers when they are advocating policies to combat ethnicity pay gaps."

The BBC, which has long grappled with how to make its work culture and decision-making more inclusive, while driving greater diversity in production and content creation, launched its [Creative Allies Initiative](#) in 2020. The aim was to create a set of educational guidelines to encourage leaders with influence to become champions of inclusion and diversity. The programme has gamified elements: champions can use [The Ally Track](#) digital tool to understand how different types of privileges — from ethnicity to gender to income — shape access to career opportunities. Upon completion of the game, words appear on a black and white screen: "Your place in life can be defined by the advantages or disadvantages you're born with in comparison to others. Disadvantages can lead to discrimination that shapes the opportunities you have in life and in the workplace."

While the app seems basic, starting with this foundation could be key, as one BBC executive points out, "We have to teach people that you have to stop talking and listen to what someone else has to say. Targets, however, tend to be much more interesting to leadership because they are quantifiable. Yet, targets can be othering, problematic and tokenising."

This culture is slowly changing, they add:

"The pandemic has forced management to realise that people are people. Humans have become more human. We need to let people bring their whole selves to work."

Attempting to always quantify the impact of inclusion and diversity often misses the point of seeing people in the creative industry as people, not just numbers or boxes to tick. This same distortion trickles up into how decision-makers are perceived. Adrienne Shaw, leading queer game studies scholar and author of *Gaming at the Edge*, has said the same of the gaming industry. "We need to have legitimate conversations about representation and be more willing to talk about how certain decisions were made. Right now, we don't have this information. For example, who decided that Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* was going to be queer? Who was involved? Who got to make these decisions?"

## 4. OPPORTUNITIES: GOOD PRACTICE AND AREAS FOR FUTURE INVESTMENT

*“Drama impacts us on an emotional level. It enables us to walk in the shoes of another person and understand their reality in a way factual programmes do not. If we want to understand our diverse neighbours, if we want to be a society at peace with itself and not try to scapegoat one set of people for whatever reason, I believe drama is the best way to do that.”*

**Sir Lenny Henry and Marcus Ryder**  
MBE, *Access All Areas: The Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond*

This section explores practical ways we can upend existing power structures to create vibrant, innovative content, in television drama in particular. As Sir Lenny Henry, above sets out, and as Zamzam Ibrahim, climate activist and vice president of the European Students' Union, states, “For me, the one hour in a day where I switch off and watch *Eastenders*, I live in that world and experience the issues the characters' experience, and those issues become normalised for me because I'm so invested in those characters.”

Here we explore the power of drama as a tool for disrupting stereotypes and promoting a 'larger us' (as opposed to narratives that perpetuate a polarised 'them and us'). We offer practical opportunities for funders to invest in drama interventions, including by bringing lived experience into writers' rooms, connecting content creation to communications research and supporting networks.

### 4.1 LIVED EXPERIENCE IN WRITERS' ROOMS

*“We need funders to invest in this work on a larger scale – to see it as integral. Working with culture makers is not frontline in the traditional sense. We're not setting up refuge shelters so it doesn't have the same urgency. But it is so urgent; it affects everything. It affects how the vital issues of our sector are felt and understood by the public, which influences government policy, which in turn influences public norms and attitudes.”*

**Nathalie McDermott, chief executive, On Road Media**

McDermott states in the quote above. This view was stressed by other interviewees:

*“It's not just about making work “for”, or “with” – we must move to making work by and led by autistic and disabled artists. There is no other protected characteristic which is so absent from the decision-making processes.”*

**Patrick Collier, executive director, Access All Areas**

*“We need to remove the barriers that people face to get commissioned and provide opportunities for those from different backgrounds and experiences to create content. Geography matters too. It comes back to how we can get more regional storytellers to write and develop content that gets made for pop culture.”*

**Abigail Scott Paul, director of external relations, LEEDS 2023 Year of Culture**

The work that is underway to diversify the entertainment industries is beginning to chip away at outdated structures, fixed mindsets, and one dimensional ways of working. But there is still a long way to go. A key opportunity is to support people from under-represented communities and with lived experience to shape, influence, write and direct cultural content as Nathalie



## Case Study:

### On Road Media | Talking About Poverty

[On Road Media](#) changes the popular conversation about issues that matter, supporting a range of groups and people to communicate safely and effectively to catalyse and sustain change. Over the years, they have worked on the issues of trans representation, sexual violence, migration, climate justice and palliative care, moving away from seeing awareness-raising as the end goal towards a greater emphasis on the type of awareness, one that leaves the audience in a more helpful and less fatalistic place.

In 2018, On Road Media began a partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Frameworks Institute to improve how the UK media talks

about poverty. Talking About Poverty supports people who have experienced poverty by giving them strategic communication and self-care skills, mentoring and peer support. Network members are introduced to influential media professionals through 'interactions', which are carefully curated and informal meet-ups with media professionals, from news editors to soap opera writers.

One of those interactions was with the team at the soap *Emmerdale*, which led to a powerful storyline about young carers and people with low income. The team at *Emmerdale* said the interaction, "provided them with the tools to do justice to this storyline." Network members who had

experience of being young carers and had been trained in using the [Talking About Poverty framing toolkit](#), were able to share experiences of being "swept away" by poverty, making sure these issues were covered in an authentic way, creating the right resonance with the audience.

Liam Fox, the actor who plays Dan in *Emmerdale*, a father who after an allergic reaction is now partially paralysed and struggling to work, said of the support he received from the project: "Parents [are] fighting for every penny and children losing their childhoods, seeming older than their ages due to the stressful lives they lead... I can't imagine performing this storyline without the input the organisation gave to the show."

Television programmes play a crucial role in either upending or perpetuating stereotypes. We need to create writers' rooms led and directed by women, people of colour, marginalised and under-represented communities. Lived experience is a fundamental part of this process as these interviewees state:

*"I am autistic and I've worked on some script consultations. I've seen how it's very trendy to write about a character with autism, but the only time it's done well is when autistic people are consulted. Otherwise you get horrendous tropes. You can make your writers' rooms as diverse as you like, but by definition, everyone in there will be someone already involved and working in the creative sector and so you end up missing out on other people's experiences. You end up missing out the experiences of disabled people and you never get to see their real side — they risk being seen as pitiable side characters."*

**Chris Pike, former manager of Reframing Disability, Media Trust**

*"Before starting a career in TV, talent from diverse backgrounds have often had varied life experiences that differ from the traditional "telly" type. Talent comes from everywhere not just those who have come up through traditional routes and as an industry we need to be open to this."*

**Simone Pennant, director of the TV Collective**

## Case Study:

### StopWatch

[StopWatch](#) has led a wide-ranging campaign against the disproportionate use of stop and search by police, the increasing use of exceptional stop and search powers and the weakening of accountability mechanisms. This includes legal and policy analysis, media coverage and commentary, political advocacy, litigation, submissions to national and international organisations and community organising. The unique mix of academics, activists, young people and lawyers has proven effective at challenging the current use of the tactic and drawing attention to the realities for those on the receiving end of police powers.

Rebekah Delsol, a trustee of StopWatch shared the experience of advising on a soap opera storyline:

*"Last year, when EastEnders were doing a story on stop and search, the writers got in touch. They were looking for background for their story. Over the course of two or three months we worked with them. A group of us went down to the studio to meet the writers and shared our expertise and lived experience of stop and search. They were open doing something that reflected realities not stereotypes. We worked with them closely reviewing scripts and providing feedback and put them in touch with police officers and others who would work with them to make it seem more realistic. Police stops are often presented as a caricature, that then are easily dismissed as painting the police as racist or not reflecting the lived experience of those on the receiving end. Often the experience is more subtle, of repeated humiliating and embarrassing stops. We had that conversation about subtlety, as we wanted people to see their own experience reflected. We*

*wanted it to ring true for people on the receiving end of oppressive policing. We wanted them to show the build up of lots of experiences, rather than one abusive moment.*

*So things like ending up being late for work and losing business because of being stopped. Or impacting on a relationship if your partner doubted what happened to you. We highlighted the real impacts and explored the mental health issues.*

*The first episode that showed one of the main characters and his friend stopped by the police and the knock on impacts, which had positive reviews. It reflected many peoples' experiences and allowed others that haven't personally experienced stop and search to understand the racialised dynamics. It was a real win for reaching new audiences in an organic way, but with more funding we could have capitalised more on the advocacy around it. It's important for the general public to see the mental health impact that policing has on Black communities. It probably had quite a big impact – there were around 11 million viewers for the whole episode who saw a realistic stop and search and the impact it had on a Black man. And the writers took their time to develop the story line over a few months to show that it is not just a one-off encounter but can happen repeatedly and impact individuals, their friends and family and communities. But how do you begin to measure that impact, to capitalise on it and document it? It would help to attract funding for that."*





The StopWatch case study illustrates how a charity can powerfully infuse production with a voice of experience. In some cases, this will be a one-off period of advisory support, in others, it will be a longer running period of guidance and direction. The creative industry needs to invest in this support and recognise its value. But there is a role for philanthropy here. People with lived experience need care, support and training to be able to share their story (as the On Road Media and Access All Areas case studies show).

## Case Study:

### Access All Areas

[Access All Areas](#) makes disruptive performance by learning disabled and autistic artists. Through its Performance Company it supports the artistic development of some of the world's leading learning disabled creatives. Its award-winning Performance Making Diploma, in collaboration with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, is breaking new ground in training for learning disabled theatre makers. It has an industry-first partnership with talent agency Simon & How to represent seven professional actors with learning disabilities, as well as a ground-breaking leadership programme – “Transforming Leadership” – which supports experienced learning disabled creatives to take up leadership roles across the arts.

Patrick Collier, Executive Director of Access All Areas shared these reflections:

*“We’re interested in entertainment – entertainment rather than worthiness to tell stories. As a learning-disabled-led company, we look at the process of making stories – of creating entertainment – in a structural way. The*

*structures of culture, whether live art, TV or film, are often completely inaccessible to many learning disabled and autistic people.*

*So we look at the whole picture, consider where the obstacles are, and support an artistic process that is accessible at every step.*

*Relatively, there are still very few learning disabled actors or artists making professional work. There’s more participatory work and community opportunities, which are valuable and we champion them too as part of our programme. But the pathways to professional performance work – and by this I mean high quality paid work – are very limited. To help plug this gap we developed the Performance Making Diploma with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama – one of the leading performance training courses for learning disabled people in the world. We’re also changing the practice of production companies, TV networks and*

*venues through our Consultancy offer. Being inclusive is not just about giving more people chances to get jobs in inaccessible companies – it’s about changing the way those companies work. We insist on taking up space in the creative room.*

*Access All Areas can now create a package for any film or production company to support accessible casting, accessible scripting and rehearsals, and accessible on-set filming. All of this is co-led by experienced learning disabled artists, which helps create jobs for learning-disabled actors. An important part of our package is to offer trained “Creative Support Workers” to any learning disabled artist on-set or in castings. The CSWs are creative people who can give practical access support, but also help with creative interpretation of directions, understanding and learning lines, and advocating for the learning disabled artists’ creative ideas in the development process. We’re getting to the point now that we can confidently support learning disabled creatives and leaders in any professional artistic process.*

The Access All Areas case study and reflections from Paul Christian, a learning disabled creative working with Access All Areas, in *We had to learn how to stand tall and rise up*, demonstrate how a community arts project has powerfully pivoted to become an influential player in the mainstream entertainment space. It also shows how theatre as an art form can reach broader audiences, especially as much of it is moving, albeit temporarily due to Covid-19, to the digital space. In *Theatre as alchemy* (p. 43), Jordana Belaiche also elaborates on the power and potential of theatre as drama that connects with the audience.

# WE HAD TO LEARN HOW TO STAND TALL AND RISE UP

BY PAUL CHRISTIAN

Being part of a theatre company, Access All Areas - who make work by and with learning disabled and autistic artists - changed me and can change society. It allows people like us, who have gone unnoticed, to be seen. When I see or involve myself in work that represents us, I feel proud, and I want to be a role model for other disabled people, letting them know they can be whoever they want to be.

A couple of years ago I worked on a show called *Madhouse*, which was about the institutionalisation of learning disabled and autistic people. It showed how individuals were often treated as children, with many locked up, punished, fetishised, ridiculed, abused and mis-labelled. Theatre shows like *Madhouse* are a chance to tell *our* stories, fighting back against harmful words and discrimination. This is not just a piece of drama, this is our lives. There is a story behind every person and I hope the show made

non-disabled audiences rethink their attitudes.

This year I became deputy co-chair of the board of trustees at Access All Areas. Having disabled people on the board is a change in itself - before, disability was only highlighted or referenced during meetings. We hope that arts organisations like ourselves making work more accessible will cause a ripple effect in society.

Being part of a new 'Black Lives Matter' working group has been a great step in getting a conversation going around race - it feels like we are tackling an issue that needs addressing. The conversation includes ideas around unconscious bias training, how to recruit more diverse students for our training programme by connecting with local communities, how to diversify our staff and recruitment processes, and acknowledging white privilege. So, what can the arts do to support BLM and people of colour in

general? We can put more diverse people in lead roles. When I see a more inclusive cast in a show, it shows me how things are changing - we are in a state of flux.

Representation of learning disabled and autistic characters through large streaming platforms will be life-changing for a wider audience. Not everyone can get to the theatre, so this presents a chance to see ourselves validated on screen. The arts have an opportunity to effect social change - but we have to be careful that this opportunity isn't lost. In order to change you have to get green-lit at every step - each check-in point. But, when faced with a red light, the ability to enact change gets stopped. All talk must be converted into action.



# THEATRE AS ALCHEMY

## PROVIDING CONNECTION THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCE

### BY JORDANA BELAICHE

I see theatre as alchemy - a performance changes audience and performer alike, chemically, emotionally, spiritually, and through that process, social change can also occur. It is a collective, collaborative process. There's tremendous potential to ignite change from within and expose audiences to different perspectives, viewpoints, voices and stories. It provides connection through shared experience as well as allowing creatives like myself a platform to explore identity. Audiences drawn into the work I create often have some connection to it before they enter the space.

As a director, facilitating a working space that is safe and collaborative is key. I work with small casts on pieces that aim to be somewhat transformational. Projects like *Intimacy in Theatre* provide great inspiration for the ways in which popular culture can recognise the need for safety while creating, as any artistic process requires a great deal of vulnerability. This is vastly different from scenes I saw in commercial theatre, where having a 'tough skin' and learning 'not to take things personally' were considered essential character traits. Art is personal, even if the story you're telling isn't yours.

I worked on Samia Djili's *Different Sand* in 2019 at the Bunker Theatre - the first performance to have an entirely Algerian cast and creative team on the London stage. The show focused on life as a mixed race person caught between a diaspora community and the West. The creatives were all women, and our audience comprised many members of the Algerian diaspora. For some this was

the first time experiencing live theatre in London. The question was not just one of representation - of seeing Algerian people in theatre - but seeing an Algerian story told by Algerian people and experiencing that story as one. Several members of our diaspora audience actively disliked what they were seeing and several others erupted with audible glee. The show enabled access to cultural connection, for us as creators, as mixed race people and for our audience.

Like any other art form, theatre is subject to the same institutional problems and oppressions that make access a key issue. Who gets funding and where this funding comes from is politicised. It is institutions, rather than the public, dictating what we see, when and where we see it. It's hard to delineate what might be considered popular theatre as a result. This might be changing, given the current inability for theatres to remain open. The rise of online theatre and the accessibility of platforms such as TikTok and Zoom has helped younger creators, working class creators, and creators of colour find an audience - without it, many would have found it difficult to gain a foothold, let alone a following.

Sometimes lack of access can be considered a blessing, as well as a curse - it enables you to take risks you wouldn't be allowed to with a bigger platform, and with bigger, scarier funders. It means, however, that small circles of artistic elites continue casting their friends and commissioning pieces from the same writers in order to uphold institutional credit or branding rather than effect social change. Initiatives to widen participation only go so

far because, often, it's less about desiring to change the cultural landscape and more about maintaining a socially progressive image. Such schemes can often only be mobilised by the involvement of corporate funders who buy cultural capital to offset unethical institutional practices, or by local councils. Arts Council England (ACE) is a vital source of funding for many independent theatre makers but it can only take artists so far. The majority of funding, praise, exposure and accolades still circulate in a very narrow pool.

The tide is slowly shifting - the responsibility of large, cultural institutions to represent and champion underrepresented communities grows ever larger and more vital as theatres seek to attract wider audience bases. The industry is also coming under criticism from the inside. Parody Twitter accounts of theatres including the National Theatre and the Almeida Theatre have sprung up demanding that they take responsibility for 'simpling for the government' or overwhelmingly programming work by the same writers. With the dearth of live theatre and the subsequent commercialising of access to recorded live theatre, such as NT at Home, online theatre festivals such as the Living Record Festival have sprung up, with a wider range of performers, genres and topics than would otherwise be seen in traditional theatre programming. There's hope yet for popular theatre as a viable vehicle for social change.



As work done by On Road Media, StopWatch and Access All Areas reveals, there is significant power in bringing people impacted by issues like poverty and police violence into direct contact with content creators. For organisations to do this well and sensitively, whether through one-off advisory sessions or longer periods of guidance, it requires significant investment.

There is a push underway in the creative industries to represent a broader set of stories and experiences, but there is not always a good understanding about the level of investment this requires. As Simone Pennant, director of the TV Collective, a community promoting the creative and commercial value diversity adds to the British TV and film industries, describes: "I get calls from producers and directors asking for help. I cost it up and tell them how much time, then I say, yes, we can do it for X days. And they

say, 'Oh, do you charge?' That's the reality for most of us who sit in this space. There's a want and an intent, but it doesn't come with the resources that are needed. Conversations dry up, work doesn't happen in the same way when we say we want to be resourced."

There is an important role for funders in supporting the care and training that is needed. "A learning disabled artists' access needs shouldn't block them from creating artistic content. With proper funding, the right Creative Support Worker will be able to support practical access needs, and also be a creative translator to interpret directions in an accessible way," said Patrick Collier of Access All Areas. "The support worker will often be waiting in the wings, but ready to support if there are mental health or pastoral care needs, and able to help steer an artist away from anxiety attacks or sensory overload if needed."

Core funding for organisations — rather just on a project basis — is also an area ripe for philanthropic investment. As Collier said: "Where funding is concerned, of course the creative industries should be involved without question, particularly for project funding. But the structural funding of a company like ours could not exist without investment from trusts and foundations - the two sides of that are really important. A big media company is probably not going to give us £30k for an Access Manager, but if that access support is robust, they will be interested in funding artistic training and development of creative content." The inspiration from Break the Room illustrates how influential it can be to upend power structures in writers' rooms and not only produce more representative content, but also build networks and a pipeline for under-represented writers in the creative industries.

## Inspiration: Break the Room

Break the Room is a writers' room model focused on bringing writers together, often relative newcomers to the industry from under-represented communities, to create episodic television. Break The Room is pioneered by Sameer Gardezi, a decade-long writer in Hollywood who has worked as a writer, director and producer on shows ranging from *Modern Family* to *Mr Sunshine*. Break the Room is a grantee of the Pop Culture Collaborative, which is helping to change how writers' rooms are formed.

Break The Room's origin started in a crisis and with an unexpected partnership. In 2017, immediately after the Trump administration's announcement of the Muslim travel ban, Margari Aziza Hill, cofounder and executive director of the Muslim Anti-Racist Collaborative, was searching for ways to respond. As an organiser, Hill knows storytelling is one of the most effective organising strategies and wanted a vehicle to show the diverse reality of Muslim lives in contrast to the administration's false and dangerous talking points. She connected with Gardezi, a Muslim-American television writer whose parents emigrated from Pakistan to Southern California and who was also looking for a way to respond.

Together they started to conceptualise a story, born from Gardezi's long-time desire to present the complex lives of young Muslim American women in East Los Angeles and Hill's experiences as a Black American Muslim in East LA. "If we wanted to tell an LA story, we wanted it to be intersectional, not didactic," Hill says. They approached the Pop Culture

Collaborative for a grant and with that support, the writer and the organiser launched the first Break The Room writers' room.

The result was *East of La Brea*, a six-episode digital comedy that premiered at SXSW Festival, about two Muslim-American twenty-something friends in East Los Angeles. There's Aisha, who rocks cornrows and who as a Black woman represents a sizeable, but often overlooked, proportion of Muslims in the United States. Then there's Farha, a Bangladeshi-American, a weed-smoking Lyft driver who's plotting her come-up with sponsored Instagram posts. Aisha and Farha represent authentic and diverse portrayals of American Muslims not often seen in pop culture.

All of Break the Room's writers' rooms are composed of under-represented groups including people of colour writers, LGBTQ+ writers, writers with disabilities and intersections in between. To date over 40 per cent of shows developed by Break the Room have been commissioned and greenlit and 57 per cent of shows have secured producing partnerships.

According to Gardezi: "There's a need for developing content more than ever. There are lots of mentorship and networking programmes but they need to be tied into the production companies. Break the Room is cost effective and time effective. We get writers within the stream. The best case is that they get greenlit, the worst case is that we're building a network, a pipeline of writers who go on to move on to other shows. A lot of our writers move on to Netflix, Disney, ABC, the list is endless."



## 4.2 DRIVING CHANGE AT SCALE

*"What's most needed is people who can take what we know from research and from experience, of what works in practice and apply it at scale. People who have the different skills needed to do that. It's about being comms-savvy and content-savvy. The ability to collaborate with people doing different things in culture making and the communications space, bringing the two together. That's where we need to do more."*

**Nicky Hawkins, communications director, On Road Media**

There is a growing body of work on framing, narratives and strategic communications in the UK. Voluntary sector organisations are recognising how important it is to frame social and environmental issues based on research and insight. Funders could do more to amplify the impact of pop culture for social change work by investing in connections between strategic communicators, narratives experts, cultural strategists and the creative industry, as our interviewee, Nicky Hawkins, states in the quote above. Naturally, creatives will want to retain their artistic integrity and that is paramount. But advances in understanding of framing and narratives can help to guide and support the industry to minimise harms and promote a 'larger us'.

This work is valuable as it helps to understand how and why narratives have power and explores ways to upend stereotypes. In the US this was a gradual process, but is now beginning to take root, as Brett Davidson, director of media and narratives at Open

Society Foundations describes: "Three years ago there was a lot of scepticism; we had a job of convincing people about work in the cultural sphere. Now there's more interest. It's less about making the case and has shifted to being about developing a more sophisticated approach that explores how cultural change happens."

US-based initiatives to link up cultural strategists and content makers are paying dividends. The Pop Culture Collaborative has a dedicated fellowship scheme (see inspiration box) which supports deep inquiry into how narratives shape and influence pop culture. An equivalent cultural narratives fellowship scheme in the UK would provide a much-needed platform for cultural strategists with diverse experience and perspectives to explore and research how narratives shape and influence our culture.

### Inspiration: Senior Fellows Programme

The [Pop Culture Collaborative](#) is a pioneer in helping social justice leaders and content creators research how to change media representations at scale. Senior fellows have produced cutting-edge research that has shaped entertainment industry standards. Their work is strengthening pop culture for social change infrastructure and popularising authentic narratives for people of colour, Muslims, immigrants and refugees in the media.

Notable outputs produced by senior fellows include:

Maytha Alhassen's report, [Haqq and Hollywood: 100 years of Muslim tropes and how to transform them](#); exploration of [fandoms](#) and movements by Shawn Taylor; [Break the Story](#) a biannual themed digital magazine conceived by Jamilah King with Tracy Van Slyke; and a six-month experience to help culture change strategists align their efforts and build a shared process, designed by Erin Potts.

Our interviewee, Bridgit Antoinette Evans, chief executive officer at Pop Culture Collaborative, reflected on the impact of *Haqq and Hollywood*:

"A few years ago, we wanted to understand the narrative traps and tropes around Muslim people in the US. Many people recommended Dr Maytha Alhassen, who at the time was coming out of a PhD program. This fellowship offered an opportunity to make her research more visible. Maytha wrote a report called *Haqq and Hollywood*, which was a deep-dive into the tropes that live inside popular culture and are undermining the liberty, dignity and safety of Muslim people.

Because the report was released by the Collaborative and not a university it suddenly became something that a lot of people in Hollywood were reading. Maytha was invited into meetings with networks and studios to dig into what role they were playing in reinforcing toxic ideas about Muslim people. Maytha is now a writer on the Hulu comedy series *Ramy*. She has been in the writer's room for two seasons. She has an agent at a top agency and is a scholar-artist prominently situated inside of the entertainment industry.

The fellowship both formed the basis of our grantmaking strategy and it moved Maytha into a place of considerable influence within the entertainment industry. That trajectory has played out with many of our senior fellows."

Racial justice is inherently tied up with re-balancing power. We also know that entertainment industry efforts to dismantle structural racism are woefully inadequate. In the UK, we need to learn from US-based organisations working at the powerful intersection of cultural and narrative change, specifically with respect to racial justice. Many of our interviewees commented on the influence Color of Change (see inspiration box). Its work is impactful because of the connections and trust it has built up with the creative industry. It also has a strategic understanding of how the media works so it can present a persuasive case for how and why change can come about, as well as stressing the business imperative for more diverse content, which can affect the bottom line (in fact, studies in the US and the UK have consistently found that films with diverse casts [do better in box office sales](#)). In representing its constituency of people of colour, Color

of Change brings a powerful combination of people pressure through its campaigning and organising work; deep understanding of narrative change; and trusted, authentic relationships with creative industry leaders.

Johanna Blakley, managing director of the Norman Lear Center in the US referred in our interview to the value of the research they had carried out with Color of Change about police procedurals: “[That has had a huge impact on those shows. They realise they’re under the microscope now when it comes to how they depict race. We talked to one showrunner of a new police procedural that hasn’t come out yet and she said they took our report, and created a checklist for every script to make sure that they weren’t making the mistakes that we’d identified in police procedurals. I see much more openness to taking responsibility for depictions. When we started this work it was: get out of my face,](#)

[I don’t want advocates telling me what to write, this is about entertainment. That was very much the tenor of the entertainment industry. But once people got on social media and started calling out shows for ridiculous representations or outright full on inaccuracy, then they became a bit more responsive to our model of consultation and trying to get it right.”](#)

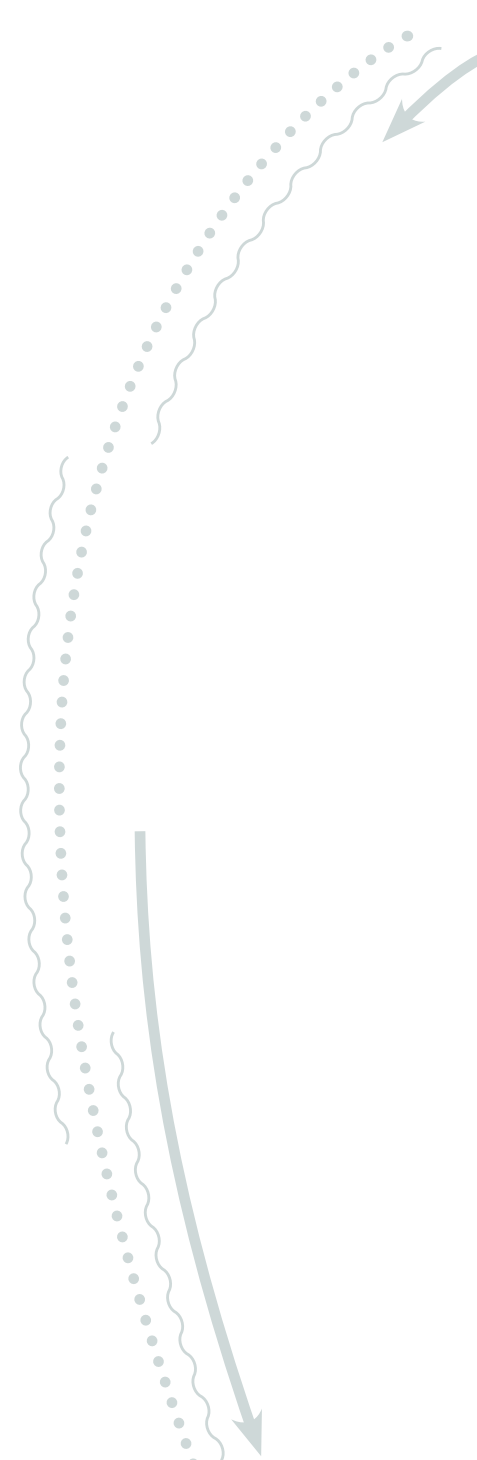
## Inspiration: Color Of Change Hollywood

[Color Of Change](#) is a US-based racial justice organisation powered by more than 1.5 million members, driving change on major issues that affect Black people’s lives. [Color Of Change Hollywood](#) is a multi-year initiative to change the rules of media: the written and unwritten rules that shape content development, production, distribution and impact.

Color of Change has sought to change racist, dangerous and inaccurate stereotypes about Black people and Black communities in the media, television and film. These on-screen stereotypes, from associations with criminality to whitewashing Black characters, have long reinforced ideas that hold back progress on racial justice and impact how Black people are treated by employers,

judges, police and society at large.

Through its work with entertainment, Color of Change has had major wins. By investing in trusting relationships in the entertainment industry, the organisation has consulted on numerous high profile shows, including the first police brutality storyline featured on ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy*. With a savviness of how to drive online community pressure, Color of Change has led successful accountability campaigns to cancel the long-running show *COPS* on FOX, and pressure Disney to change Princess Tiana’s depiction in *Wreck-It-Ralph*, after her appearance was changed to look less Black in *The Princess and the Frog*.



In the UK, funders can look to Pop Culture Collaborative and Color of Change for inspiration. As in the US, much remains to be done to challenge structural racism within the UK entertainment industry. A cultural narratives fellowship scheme in the UK — aimed to give a platform to people from under-represented groups in the creative industries — would help to explore and research how narratives shape and influence culture. This needs to have a particular focus on racial justice. Ideally this would also provide an opportunity to connect people working on narrative change with those working in the creative industries, to expose and highlight stereotypes and encourage cross-fertilisation of stories, experiences and creative ideas

### 4.3 BUILDING NETWORKS

*"It's the whole ecosystem that is important to support and nurture and help innovate, not just the individual projects."*

**Iain Dodgeon, director, OKRE**

The pursuit of a new, brave world is a collective rather than individual endeavour. Trusted networks are more important than ever. In the UK, the field of pop culture for social change, while emerging and showing great promise, is still relatively disparate. Funders can play an important role in supporting a healthy ecosystem by funding an abundance of organisations working in the pop culture for social change field. As Iain Dodgeon, quoted above, reflects, and one of our interviewees, Ella Saltmarsh, a narrative and systems change expert states: "One of the things that's needed is funding of networks, communities and field building. There's a growing understanding of the importance of this, but in order to have real cultural impact, more work and resource is needed in this space." Below we set out three areas of opportunity: investment in pop culture for social change networks; a learning journey for donors; and greater international collaboration.

#### Investing in pop culture for social change networks

Organisations like OKRE, On Road Media, PopChange at Counterpoints Arts, Solidarity with Refugees and Media Trust (as well as independent consultants acting as '[network entrepreneurs](#)') play a valuable role in building new networks and connecting artists, activists and people with lived experience with content creators. OKRE is playing a vital role in this space, as the case study demonstrates.

## Case Study:

### OKRE

[OKRE](#) is a new global charity advancing collaboration across the entertainment, social impact and research sectors. With a mission to "expand people's understanding of the world" it seeks to achieve impact at scale through the exchange of knowledge, skills and ideas. OKRE achieves its goals through four interconnected areas of work: Research, Networks, Events and Funding.

OKRE is the first cultural body to be spun out of the Wellcome Trust, building on previous work undertaken there with the entertainment industries. This work supported a vast array of creatives, including Michaela Coel and Sally Wainwright, as well as award-winning projects across film, television and games, such as *Rocks*, *Secret Life of 4 Year Olds* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. OKRE is expanding on this work with a number of new initiatives, one being OKRE Development Rooms.

This global online series is for all those in film, TV, interactive and podcasting who seek inspiration to develop new content across all genres for high impact audience engagement.

OKRE's work focuses on supporting the creation of more authentic representation of communities and social and scientific issues, informed by research and direct lived experience. Through facilitating better cross-sector collaboration at scale and supporting a space for new voices and learning, OKRE works on the notion that more can be achieved through collaboration than working independently. By nurturing an international cross-sector community OKRE believes that skills and knowledge exchange between the sectors can become normalised and more meaningful, achieving long-term impact in this space.

Several of our interviewees stressed the need for support and advice building relationships in the creative industries, while navigating and maximising the opportunity. The US-based collaborative network, Storyline Partners was set up to provide this type of support and is a helpful example of the value of equal, collaborative partnerships (see inspiration box) founded on trust. A network between organisations exploring how to engage with pop culture for social change would allow groups to discuss practical matters like fee and payment structures when working with the creative industry. This could also provide help in navigating the language of the creative industries, maximise the surrounding media opportunities and explore ways to evaluate the impact. The quotes below demonstrate the value this would bring:

*"It would be useful to have a hub for when these opportunities come up — someone who could advise on measuring impact, advocacy.*

*We didn't have any external support. It would be helpful to have someone to advise on how to maximise the opportunity as we don't have that capacity in-house."*

**Rebekah Delsol, trustee, StopWatch**

*"We also need to demystify the concept of making content for TV. If an artist is used to theatre, which tends to be more inclusive, then it can be very challenging to know how to approach TV work. We need to normalise this for learning disabled artists."*

**Patrick Collier, executive director, Access All Areas**

## Inspiration: StoryLine Partners

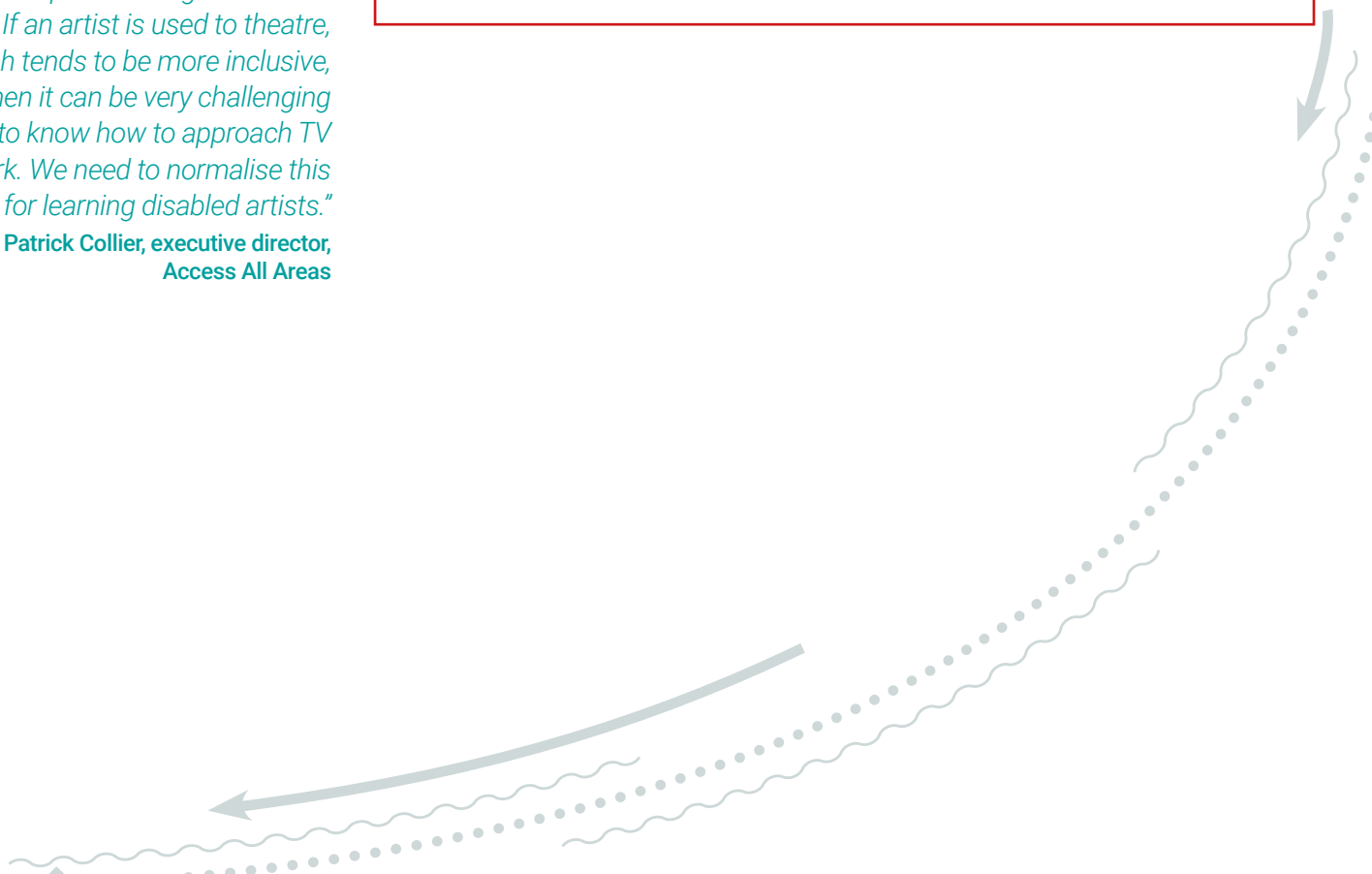
US-based [Storyline Partners](#) is a collective of culture change strategists and issue-based organisations that collaborates with entertainment industry partners to promote nuanced, accurate and equitable cultural narratives in television and film. The collective is a one-stop-shop for content creators and writers, connecting the industry to community and issue-based experts, for example on immigrant rights or trans issues, while shaping industry standards.

Kristina Mevs-Apgar, director of culture change at the National Domestic Workers Alliance and co-founder of Storyline Partners, shared these reflections about the network:

"Everyone who is part of Storyline Partners has a social justice lens on the work. We don't just work in a consulting capacity to increase accuracy of characters or stories, but to bring a racial and gender lens that can push towards more progressive values in entertainment. While we have debated the fee-for-service model, the main takeaway is for organisations to accurately value and price their labour

for consulting on projects, and for the entertainment industry to pay what these services are worth. It's critical for Storyline Partners members to be part of a social justice movement or organisations that operate within a framework of accountability, so there is a feedback loop back to the organising on the ground. It's work, however, that requires organisational buy-in, as it's an intensive time commitment. It also requires deep trust. If members didn't have friendships beforehand, then this type of collaboration would not work.

Our impact needs to go beyond individual storylines and script markups and aspire to create standards at the studio and network level. A successful early stage example of this is the [Culture Code](#) we are going to be consulting on for ViacomCBS' MTV Entertainment Group and other organisations. However, our strategy is just one strategy. There need to be others. We need pipelines for talent in Hollywood. Organisations doing consulting. Diversity among executives. To build new models for distribution. And many other approaches."





## A shared learning journey for donors

The US offers inspiration to UK funders interested in investing in pop culture for social change. In 2016, Liz Manne Strategy published the [#PopJustice report series](#) with support from Unbound Philanthropy and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. This led to the creation of The Pop Culture Collaborative, a philanthropic resource and funder-learning community working to transform the narrative landscape in America around people of colour, immigrants, refugees, Muslims and Indigenous peoples, especially those who are women, queer, transgender or disabled. The Collaborative supports the growth of the pop culture for social change ecosystem in four interconnected program areas: grantmaking, convening and networking, narrative design and philanthropic learning.

This latter area, philanthropic learning, was a key early strand of the Pop Culture Collaborative's work. Brett Davidson, director of media and narratives at Open Society Foundations described the significance of this approach: "[The Pop Culture Collaborative developed case studies with some of its grantees such as Color of Change and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, looking at how they have used pop culture strategically. They've really invested in donor education. The initial funding partners encouraged joint learning — it was an invitation to come and learn together. That was really important.](#)"

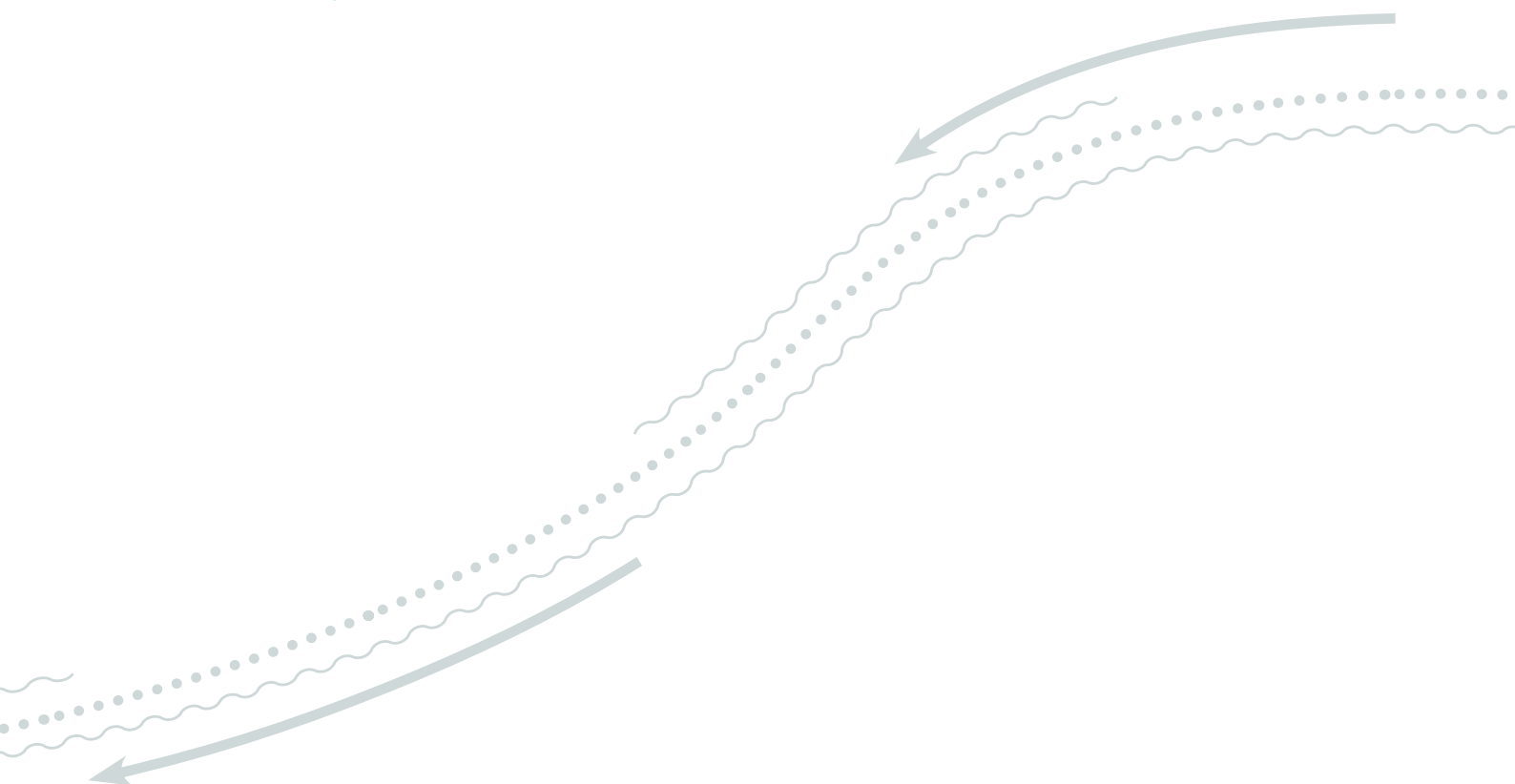
## Inspiration: Donor Learning Journey

The [Pop Culture Collaborative](#) serves as a strategic adviser for foundations wanting to invest in narrative and pop culture grantmaking. Below, chief executive officer, Bridgit Antoinette Evans provides insight into the donor learning journey, running through the stages of 'hunch', 'strategic research' followed by the 'plan and implementation' phase:

"The first stage is usually a smart grantee project that the funder has a hunch is needed. A grantee says, 'I know you've been funding me all this time to do organising work or litigation work, but we are not breaking through into the mainstream around these issues, but there could be a path through culture.' And someone takes the chance and gives the money for the project, whether an Oscar campaign or music video. Based on the results, it becomes a confirmation for these funders, some who already have an appreciation for the arts, that there is something else that they could be doing in the culture space. So the first stage becomes about giving in to the hunch and stepping out of the familiar.

Then there is a process: we can't just fund this project here or this project there. We need a strategy. How are we going to turn to our board and demonstrate the effectiveness of these grants? So they start doing research, looking for people who could help them find a path towards wisdom around this work. So the second stage for funders is to find a thought partner, a consultant team, some sort of an adviser who knows about this work and can help design a learning path for those foundation staff. This can last for years in some cases.

Out of that process comes a plan, a strategy. We're going to focus on this, here are our priorities. Here's the impact. Here's how it relates to our other advocacy goals. The next stage is testing that plan and consistently iterating. And organising power within one's institution to make that plan viable. Witnessing this trajectory among our early funders, we created a formal learning journey."



UK-based funders need opportunities for similar journeys. There is an appetite and interest in the pop culture for social change field, but there is tentativeness around investing in the infrastructure. A key part of this learning is recognising that cultural change is more likely to come about by transforming the field overall, rather than putting forward specific messages or campaigns. Conveying 'larger us' values drives change across all social and justice issues, not just individual areas of concern. There is also a financial incentive for collaborative funding. As one of our interviewees stated, "budgets don't go far enough if you fund in silos."

The next step is to bring UK-based funders together to explore how they can fund (ideally collaboratively) in this space. A central feature of this work will be stressing that evaluation and impact measurement of cultural change is possible and necessary. We delve into the issue of evaluation in section 6 of this report.

## Support for international collaboration

Some of our interviewees referred to the value of establishing global networks of pop culture for social change practitioners. Opportunities to learn and share from international examples are crucial for this emerging sector. OKRE has global links and its online events have brought together creatives, activists and cultural strategists from around the world and across entertainment. More efforts to connect through global exchanges, conferences and international fellowships would help organisations learn together. Counterpoints Arts has organised a series of pop culture for social change retreats in recent years which have been valuable opportunities to convene artists, researchers, creatives and strategists from across UK, US and Europe.

Pop culture for social change initiatives in the US provide us with inspiration, but there are other global partners we can and should connect with. As Brett Davidson, director of media and narratives at Open Society Foundations explains: "The conversation in the US is very separate from much of the rest of the world, particularly the Global South. There is a huge experience of people in the development sector working with mass entertainment, such as *Soul City* in South Africa, which is an influential soap opera, with a huge audience. Programmes like this have had a lot of success, particularly on health issues and domestic violence."

According to interviewee Favianna Rodriguez, who is an interdisciplinary artist and president of the US-based [Center for Cultural Power](#), the time global collaboration is now. "The pandemic revealed a huge opening for international solidarity. We have witnessed how young people in the climate justice movement have worked across borders to expose the failures of capitalism and destruction of our planet. Black Lives Matter has created a simple and compelling international narrative around anti-blackness. Still, we need broader meta-narratives to connect the immigrant rights movement. In countries like the UK, those narratives must include a truth and reconciliation process about the harm that colonialism has inflicted."

Institutions like the US-based Norman Lear Center recognise the power of global networks and collaborate on research and impact evaluation with partners in film industry centres like Nigeria, India and Colombia. In gaming too, while the industry has long been dominated by the US, UK and Japan, countries like [Kenya](#) and [Poland](#) are rapidly becoming game development innovation hubs. This international nature of labour and production in the gaming industry has given rise to organisations like the [International Game Developers Association](#) (IGDA), the world's largest non-profit membership organisation for game makers with chapters in over 30 countries. More support is needed to build on these connections.

## 5. POTENTIAL: HORIZON SCANNING AND FUTURE VISIONING

From *Riding the Waves* in 2017 to *New Brave World* in 2021, we have witnessed major power and opportunities in the pop culture and social change field. Looking at trends and heeding the wisdom of our interviewees, this growth is set to continue. In this section, we explore the power of gaming and technologies to make immersive storytelling accessible and available to all. We finish with reflections on the importance of normalisation in driving social change.

### 5.1 360 DEGREE VIEW OF CULTURE

*"We need a 360 degree view of narrative across mediums. Culture change is still sometimes perceived as just influencers in Hollywood or working with artists on murals. Rather, we need to see it as a toolbox with a wide range of options."*

Ishita Srivastava, director of culture change at Caring Across Generations

Just as our interviewees work and organise across multiple sectors, so too do the stories they create, analyse and consume travel across mediums and audiences. If we are to unlock the potential of pop culture for social change, then viewing culture from 360 degrees is critical. We must check our own biases about what we consider to be effective forms of entertainment. Practically speaking, this means our cultural strategies must be flexible enough to follow the path of narratives, which increasingly travel across entertainment mediums.

Games in particular have, in recent years, served as inspiration for TV and film. *The Witcher*, originally a fantasy novel series, was adapted into a game and later a Netflix show. *The Last of Us* series, hailed for its nuance of queer and trans representation, was picked up as a show by HBO. And Cate Blanchett is [set](#) to star in a film adaptation of the space western game *Borderlands*.

Despite the growing potential and size of gaming communities, philanthropy has often overlooked gaming and the games industry as a viable part of the pop culture for social change field. Whereas scripted drama and working with showrunners is starting to receive a greater influx of funding, games, despite their impact and reach, are still seen "as a third add-on to the entertainment industry", according to Robin Gray, founder

of Gayming Magazine. Phoenix Perry, gamemaker and Senior Lecturer at UAL Creative Computing Institute agrees: "Games are seen as the media newcomer, siloed from film and television. But games are influential cultural objects and their persuasive power in our society cannot be understated. We must consider the social implications of that."

Games, however, offer uniquely interactive ways of experiencing narratives. What would it look like if an open world game embedded the history of the AIDS epidemic like in the series *It's A Sin*? What would London in *Watch Dogs Legion* look and feel like with thriving queer public spaces? Could a game tackle police brutality and [systemic racism](#) head-on? Could we feature a disabled superhero protagonist whose lived experiences shape but do not determine their future? What if *The Sims* included collective care options for ageing characters?

Indie development studios, while also grappling with diversity, have long led the charge on taking more narrative risks. *"We have seen a queer renaissance in gaming over the last five years, now that it's easier to make indie games with tools like Unity and itch.io,"* said Gray. *These queer storylines in indie games have put positive pressure on AAA (major to mid-sized) companies. This has also happened with representation of women and people of colour. In terms of innovation, we need to watch the indies. Publishers need to invest in developers that have equality and diversity policies and refuse to engage with crunch periods."*

The time is right for philanthropy to begin investing in organisations like POC in Play, BAME in Games, Gayming Magazine, Code Coven and numerous others mentioned

throughout this report. These organisations, many small and volunteer run, are pioneering strategies and bringing a much-needed social justice lens to the rapidly growing games industry. If we are to invest in groundbreaking stories, then we must also flexibly and fluidly travel with our communities and target audiences, meeting them where they are at. And more often than not, there are fandoms, TikTok, Discord, Twitch or gamer adjacent online spaces (see inspirations).



## Inspiration: Fandoms

Fandoms have long existed as subculture or “participatory culture [that] shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement,” writes media scholar Henry Jenkins. Entire online communities have formed around passions for *Star Wars* or Harry Potter or even Beyoncé, many as spaces to counteract toxicity online and reimagine alternative worlds. This is especially true for Black people and people of colour, queer and trans people and people living with disabilities.

In a 2020 open letter analysing the social justice power of Fandoms, Pop Culture Collaborative senior fellow, [Shawn Taylor](#), writes: “Fandom can be a tool for social change by engendering change at multiple levels: the individual, the group/ institution and society. It is also organic, with individual fans creating ideas and content that are rapidly adopted by others. This combination of speaking truth to power, filtered through a pop culture affection, produced by large and disparate groups of people, makes fandom a mechanism for an entirely reimagined form of social power.”

Kish Hirani, chair of BAME in Games, an organisation that encourages and supports diverse talent in the gaming industry, said that additional funding for training is critical: “We need recognition from the government, trade unions and political bodies that the video games industry matters. We need more funding put into formal apprenticeships in creative industries that are funded by philanthropy or local governments, because small to mid-size gaming studios can’t afford to do this and larger studios have very little, if any, incentive to do so.”

Another early investment could be making grants specifically available for organisations focused on gaming. “It is difficult for us to compete for the interest of philanthropists or government-run charity funding options when other causes are in need, despite even a relatively small contribution being able to completely fund some of our larger projects and support our staff,” said Dr Alayna Cole, managing director of Queerly Represent Me, a nonprofit that consults with the industry on representation and company culture. “A recurring and relatively secure financial contribution that allows organisations like ours to hit a base figure annually and therefore ensure at least one of our team members could dedicate full-time work to our cause, would make a significant difference in the progress we could make.”

The work done by Queerly Represent Me points to another future opportunity for investment, discussed at length in the context of scripted dramas in the Opportunities section: writers’ rooms. (see case study). Game designer and co-founder of POC in Play, Chella Ramanan, said consultants, as well as getting creators with lived experience into game writers’ rooms, can make all the difference:

“Bring in consultants early and periodically so you don’t go off track. *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* not only had consultants involved, but had the expertise of Evan Narcisse, a Black writer with deep experience in the games and comic book industries.”

## Inspiration: Streaming — from Gamer to Creator

The advent of social media platforms which allow users to generate their own content have further blurred the lines of consumer and creator. Viewership on YouTube and Twitch, where gamers stream themselves playing games, has skyrocketed, especially among young audiences.

“Streaming has ushered in a complete gaming revolution. Streamers are the new frontier of queer and diverse spaces, given the welcoming communities built around them. They offer opportunities to talk about mental health, isolation and many other issues, on top of gaming,” said Robin Gray, co-founder of Gayming Magazine.

Gayming Magazine has featured a regular spotlight on streamers, who are cultivating welcoming community spaces or tackling issues like mental health. For example, trans streamer [AQuarterGhost](#),

who is part of Rainbow Arcade and co-founded The Breadbox, uses streaming as a way to raise money for charity. On their “chill vibes” stream, they seek to create, “a welcoming and friendly environment that promotes inclusivity and uplifts marginalised voices.”

[Black Girl Gamers](#), another powerhouse team of streamers, created a safe online space for Black women in gaming. In addition to numbering thousands across social media platforms, the group hosts offline events, geared towards promoting diversity and inclusion. [Team Halo](#) grew as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The team of volunteers creates short videos about vaccine and health information on TikTok and Instagram, using algorithms smartly for maximum reach.



## Case Study:

### Consulting on Games

From solo developers and indie studios to major companies known as AAAs, the games industry relies on consultants to shape character development, provide feedback on scripts and review game demos. Queerly Represent Me, a small nonprofit, has been consulting with the games industry since 2016, including on [Sunless Skies](#), a game critiquing British imperialism developed by UK-based Failbetter Games.

Dr Alayna Cole, managing director of Queerly Represent Me, reflected on this work:

"I think individuals and teams see the value of this work more now than they did when we first started. However, indie studios often don't have the money to pay for enough in-studio developers

let alone external consultants, and AAA studios can sometimes have long legal processes around intellectual property and external consultants that are prohibitive and discouraging for their employees to pursue. We do work with non-games organisations to help increase our income, but that still doesn't provide us with the resources to dedicate even one person full-time to our work.

I do think that more people need to engage with services like this, but I don't think lack of interest is the only — or even the main — barrier preventing that. Studios need to have the budget for diversity consultation and also need to have more awareness of the organisations that can provide these services. One of the best ways for us to gain this greater awareness is through

attending events where many industry representatives gather, and Covid-19 blocked that avenue for us in 2020.

Despite those barriers, the consultancy work we have done has made a difference. We have gathered impact statements and anecdotal evidence to suggest that the developers we've worked with have felt better about their projects following our consultations, their employees have felt better in their workplaces and their games have resonated better with their audiences. I think our additional research projects and publications have also made an impact on the industry — many of these resources are freely available and use games or game-types as examples, and I know that some developers have been inspired by those resources to make more inclusive games and workplaces."

## 5.2 IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING FOR ALL

Advances in technology have expanded the realm of possibility for who can experience — and create — media. Gregory Haynes, Lead Games User Researcher at The AbleGamers Charity says "we are in the third wave of human-computer interaction — this means we have to consider people first." According to Haynes and his colleague Craig Kaufman, Director of Community & Inclusion, the conversation around accessibility has had a snowball effect on the games industry.

This should not come as a surprise: while global numbers are hard to come by, The AbleGamers Charity estimates that there are around 46 million players with disabilities in the US. As populations in countries like the US and the UK age, the pool of gamers who may require assistive options — from larger texts to speech enhancements — will only grow. "All options are accessibility depending on what you use them for," said Haynes. "Even people who don't identify as having a disability, use accessibility options. It really is about usability. The industry needs to know that small

changes can make a huge difference. We want people to have more agency through options."

As an organisation, The AbleGamers Charity works on many fronts. On the industry side, they help video game developers ideate accessibility from the very beginning (see case study on Accessible Player Experience). On the community side, they bring the voices and experiences of players with disabilities into design rooms through Player Panels. Haynes said, "we have a pool of over 500 players with disabilities that we bring in to garner data on accessibility. Through Player Panels, developers can connect with players and get their play-testing feedback. We also want players to be compensated for their time, which needs to be respected. It's a program that is free to access — we don't charge the company or the player."

## Case Study:

### Accessible Player Experience

Accessibility has become one of the major shifts underway in the games industry. The AbleGamers Charity, which recently received a [one million dollar donation](#) from the streaming giant Twitch, believes that making games more inclusive on the back-end opens up the industry to greater representation on the front-end. In an interview, Craig Kaufman and Gregory Haynes from The AbleGamers Charity explain the impact of the organization's accessible game design thinking tool, [Accessible Player Experience](#) (APX), on gamers and game-makers alike:

"There are 46 million players with disabilities in the United States — that's more than the population of California! Moreover, it is a group with financial power: adults with disabilities have [21 billion dollars](#) of discretionary income. When you put these facts together, the industry really starts to listen to the power of this community, which for a long time has been ignored.

AbleGamers Charity Vice President, [Dr. Christopher Power](#) (University of Prince Edward Island) and Scholar in Residence, [Prof. Paul Cairns](#) (University of York) led our research team in developing APX to ground industry professionals in accessibility at the onset of the design process. As a tool, APX helps developers make more accessible game content. It's like an enhanced lingua franca or bridge language that helps developers

understand the barriers that players with disabilities may come across when playing digital games. APX comes with a practitioner course and set of design patterns that serve as inspiration.

For example, the design pattern called Second Channel addresses the barrier that some players experience in being unable or unreliably able to take in information from the game. For instance, your game may have characters that speak and give players hints or instructions through audio dialogue. If a player cannot understand information in this way, then there is a barrier blocking them from experiencing the game. One solution is to present the same information through an additional channel like subtitles, which present the dialogue visually rather than just through audio. Second Channel — and the other design patterns that comprise the APX tool — assist developers in ideating solutions for challenges that players may experience in accessing a game's content.

Our practitioner courses have already been taken by developers at Square Enix, Volition, Activision Blizzard and many others, and interest from the industry remains high. In addition to questions about game mechanics, we've even gotten questions about disability representation in games, which wouldn't have been possible without giving more players access to these games in the first place."

Phoenix Perry, senior lecturer, UAL Creative Computing Institute, also believes that the concept of "universal design" is an outdated mode for experience media and stories:

"[Making everyone use the same interface technique, as if we all have the same bodies, is a broken concept. It took 18 years for Xbox to release an adaptive controller. Unfortunately, these controllers are still super expensive.](#)"

Perry launched the first [Alt Ctrl Game Jam](#) as a way of designing alternative controllers. Such designs could [range](#) "from the simple, like a spray bottle or slappable rubber zombie head, to the elaborate, like a small tent where players role-play a unicorn with an office job," as participants in a similar game jam created.

In the games industry, the rise of open source platforms like Twine and Bitsy or cross-platform game engines like Unity means that more players are able to control their game experiences or even become game-makers. "One of the things I'm most excited about is that game-making tools are becoming more accessible," said Perry. "Many don't require you to know how to code at all. By removing these technical barriers, we are allowing people to make creative work, small stories and games based on personal narratives and personal experience. The more we can customise and personalise interfaces which people use to game, the more we tap the potential of games for personal transformation, not just mass consumption."

## 5.3 REACHING FOR NORMALISATION

*"We need more diversity across the board. Otherwise, there is so much pressure on a single character or single storyline to carry the weight of an entire community. The more diversity there is writ large, the more a single character representation does not have to speak for the whole community."*

**Dr Adrienne Shaw, associate professor at Temple University and founder of the LGBTQ Video Game Archive**

There is no perfect queer character or Muslim protagonist or Black superhero. There also is not an ideal storyline that will tackle racism, win justice for migrants and suddenly uproot transphobia all in one go. Yet, there is an immense pressure on characters who are under-represented, and by extension the creatives who develop them, to achieve a level of perfection. This pressure, in part, comes from how few nuanced and multidimensional representations of marginalised people and communities exist, though major headway has been made, as the countless examples in this report reveal.

Evan Narcisse, the writer behind Marvel's *Black Panther* comic book series and narrative consultant on the video game *Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, [said](#) in an *LA Times* interview: "If you know superhero publishing history, there's always the moment where Black heroes have to face racism or solve racism. It can be a big broad metaphor, like the *Sons of the Serpent* in Marvel Comics, or it can be something more gestural or kind of ambient. There's a range of approaches here and we tried to modulate in a way that felt true to the character. Miles is a young man learning to make his way into the world. He's not going to have all the answers."

As Narcisse reveals, we can and should be striving towards an abundance of representation that includes many nuanced characters and multidimensional storylines. This means spectacular genre-bending TV shows, as well as mediocre ones. As presenter and comedian Sideman, [summarises](#): "There's white excellent, white mediocre, white sometimes, white great, white good, white not so good on screen. But when it comes to Black, there's Black excellence

on screen, not that much Black mediocre present. But we want you to be able to pick the medium-sized comedian too." Dr Adrienne Shaw, who is a leading queer game studies scholar, agrees: "If you had a trans character in *Call of Duty*, then there is so much pressure on them. At what point do you just get to be the mediocre character?"

Shaw, who founded the LGBTQ Game Archive, emphasised how a historical understanding of diversity in games contributes to the presence of queer and trans characters being seen as normal: "The archive shows that LGBTQ+ people and stories have been a part of games as long as games have existed. There is a tendency to treat each new instance of LGBTQ+ game content as somehow novel or groundbreaking, but the ground has long since been broken. Only by recovering that past, much of which is still being rediscovered, can the game industry and fans begin to think of new and more diverse ways LGBTQ+ people and themes can be integrated into the medium."

Sometimes, the small gestures and mundane forms of representation can be the most powerful in normalising diversity:

*"There are small and subtle ways we can make games more diverse and normalising of certain experiences. For example, a locker in a military game that shows a picture of the character's husband or wife. The game *Football Manager* is another great example. Keeping a queer player in your roster will actually make your merchandise value go up. It's a small way to incentivise gamers,"* said Robin Gray, founder of Gayming Magazine.

Normalisation and mundane representations have also worked well in addressing the fear response present in polarising debates, one that is often activated when dominant narratives are challenged. Trans rights, for example, have become associated with politically charged debate. Our sources have said that rather than grapple with the challenges, many mainstream news outlets have shied away from covering trans rights as a way to avoid a backlash. Animations and cartoons, however, have tackled trans identity head-on, creating space for empathetic

conversations. *She-Ra*, a breakout series about friendship, love and superhero princesses, weaves LGBTQ+ identity through the entire narrative, creating space for queer and trans voices actors. As Owl Fisher and Fox Fisher [report](#) in the *The Guardian*, the series "doesn't revolve around the fact that its characters have different ethnicities, body types and sexualities, but rather allows them to coexist in a free and open way. They are LGBTQ+ and proud, but it's not the main driver for the drama."

The award-winning *Schitt's Creek*, and its queer relationship storyline, is testament to the power of normalisation. According to creator Dan Levy, it's sometimes important to provide a safe space for people to learn and change their minds at their own pace, rather than be forcibly challenged. "I never learn when I feel I am being taught a lesson," he said in a documentary on the making of the show. The show has remained popular, [making history](#) in 2020 for the most Emmy wins by a comedy series in a single series.

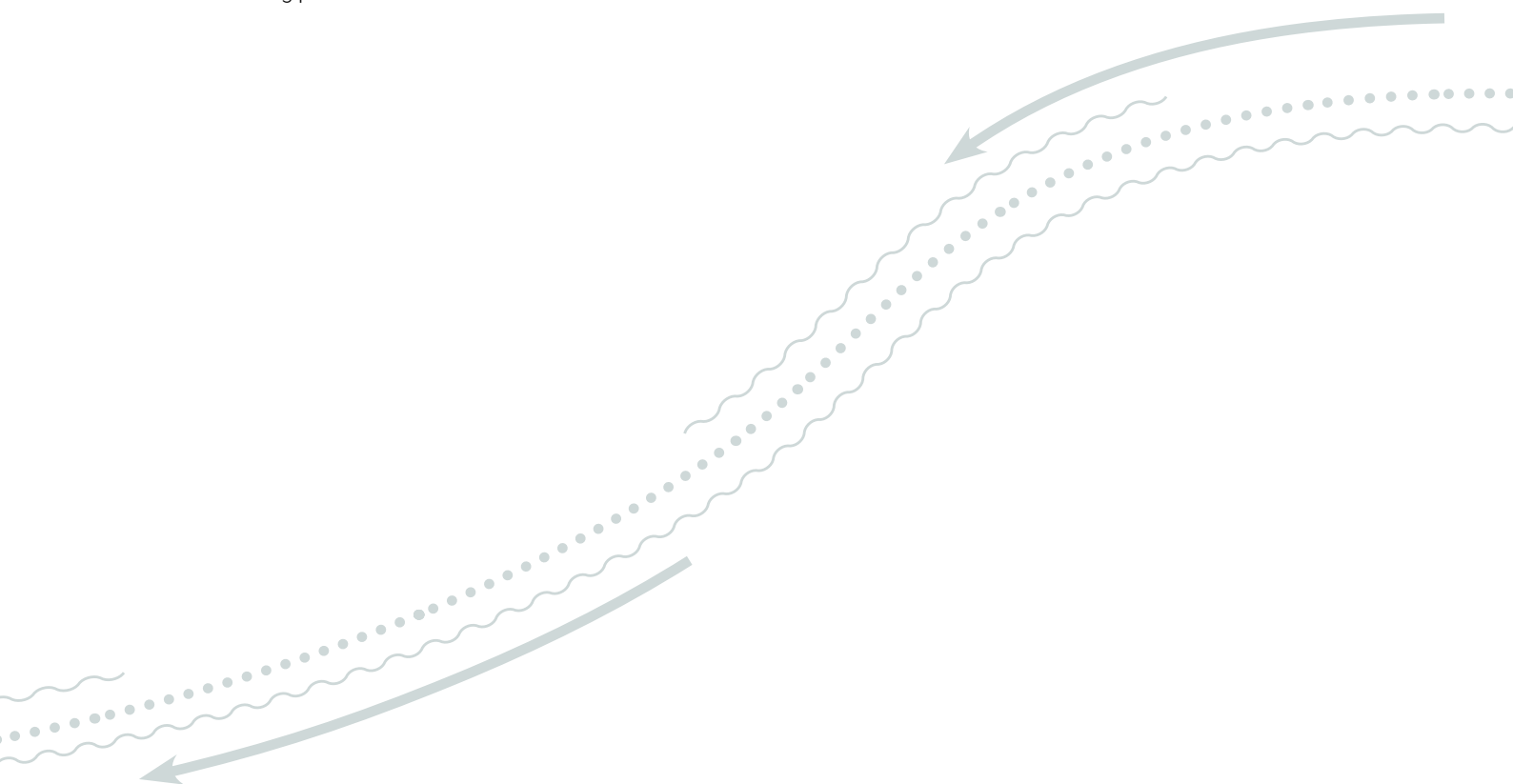
Normalisation, however, is not just confined to LGBTQ+ representation. The US series *The Affair* subtly addresses climate change by fast-forwarding 20 years into the future. Environmental degradation becomes the backdrop: viewers witness coastal communities devastated and sea levels rising. The impact is normalised. *Blackish*, another US series, reflects on prejudices, class and bootstrap narratives openly in the context of Black experience. Using comedy, the show makes deep points without heaviness. Even fashion designer and British *Vogue* editor-in-chief Edward Enninful has pushed the magazine to normalise a whole range of experiences. He [said](#) in an interview: "You know, gay, working-class, Black. So for me it was very important with *Vogue* to normalise the marginalized, because if you don't see it, you don't think it's normal."

When characters or storylines do not get representation right, then there is always the prospect of backlash. *Spider-Man: Miles Morales* was critiqued for its handling of police. The episodic game [Life is Strange](#) in which a lesbian character is asked to sacrifice her lover (echoing *The Last of Us*

Part I) was called "[a hot mess](#)." However, social media debate especially among critics and fanbases is a good thing that leads to greater accountability. It is a space that marginalised communities have to organise and demand for better representation.

Such organising has quelled a backlash against CBBC for [featuring](#) a kiss between two teenage girls on the Canada drama *The Next Step*. In response to complaints, the BBC simply [replied](#), "We believe that the storyline, and the kiss, was handled with sensitivity and without sensationalism, following as it did the portrayal of Jude and Cleo's developing relationship and I'm afraid we do not agree that it was inappropriate for the audience age." When teenage dancer and YouTube personality Jojo Siwa [came out](#) as part of the LGBTQ+ community an outpouring of support and solidarity overshadowed sudden backlash among parents.

In *The danger of reinforcing dehumanising narratives on television* (p. 57), Dawn Foster and Micha Frazer-Carroll discuss how problematic working-class stereotypes get normalised through television and how some sit-coms have challenged them.





# THE DANGER OF REINFORCING DEHUMANISING NARRATIVES ON TELEVISION

## IN CONVERSATION BETWEEN DAWN FOSTER AND MICHA FRAZER-CARROLL

**Dawn Foster:** Growing up in the late 1990s/early 2000s, bar the example of soaps, there was very little working class representation on TV, far less so racially. There were more members of Asian families in each of my classes than in all the soaps combined. And it honestly feels like little has changed, gatekeepers in the cultural industries have always been more interested in telling privileged stories.

**Micha Frazer-Carroll:** You're right. Reflecting on my childhood in the early 2000s, the only working class narratives I saw on TV were overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical. It was the era of Channel 4's *Benefits Street* and the BBC's *Little Britain*. Having a middle-class upbringing, I was unaffected by *Benefits Street*'s specific strain of dehumanisation. Still, *Little Britain* left the scars of racism and ableism on my self-esteem growing up. It feels like the message has always been that if you are a marginalised person, particularly someone without the material circumstances that provide access to the industry, then art is not really for you. It will also seldom be about you, and when it is, the industry will reinforce dominant ideologies, the ones that dehumanise you.

**Dawn Foster:** That point — “it’s not for you, or about you” — is really key. We’re still given limited storylines in pop culture, though it’s slowly improving. I’ll admit to watching a lot of TV during lockdown, most of it older American series that have retained their popularity, *The X-Files*, *It’s Always Sunny In Philadelphia* and *House*. In interviews, their writers’ talk about social issues evolving over time and with hindsight, they’ve often admitted that certain associated jokes or storylines were missteps. Whereas with something like *Little Britain*, which was knowingly, deliberately cruel to many communities, it’s considered “of its time” and barely spoken of now, despite its creators’ massive fame.

**Micha Frazer-Carroll:** That “of its time” concept is interesting, because at that time, our communities often knew that things were wrong. I think we sometimes undervalue that. The fact that those ideas weren’t the ‘norm’ for everyone, but for the creators who had power and the (wealthy) audiences they cared about capturing. Everyone talks about how *Friends* was disproportionately white and “hasn’t aged well”, but viewer statistics in the 1990s

show that *Friends* bombed with Black audiences. Oprah Winfrey made a joke about the show’s whiteness in front of the cast in 1995. But Black audiences weren’t then seen as part of that showbusiness model.

**Dawn Foster:** *Friends* is a really good example. And *The Royle Family* is another example. It was dismissed by middle-class reviewers as lazy stereotyping of the working class, but was hugely popular and resonant with a lot of working-class people. And none of the jokes were cruel, which was key. They were very tender, like in the episode where the youngest son gets a smart job that requires a suit. This allowed the series to become timeless.



## 6. EVALUATION AND IMPACT MEASUREMENT

This section shares our learning and reflections gleaned from interviews about measuring the impact of the pop culture for social change field. We have split the section into two parts. The first sets out what we know about impact evaluation, why we need to grapple with it and how we can bust myths around measurement being unachievable. The second part reflects on some of the knottier challenges, offers a note of caution and explains where we have knowledge gaps.

### 6.1 BUSTING THE MYTHS

We called this section ‘busting the myths’ because we want to be explicit and upfront about the fact that cultural content can and should be measured and evaluated. Our interviewee, Johanna Blakley, managing director of the Norman Lear Center in Los Angeles described the misunderstandings about impact measurement that needed to be overcome in the early years of her work: “The main obstacle from the beginning was this misperception that’s been promulgated by just about everyone, that you can’t measure the social impact of this work. That’s one reason why funders have shied away. But now organisations are beginning to realise that you can measure this. These kinds of metrics lead to bigger investment because there’s some accountability for the work. That trajectory is going in the right direction.”

Impact measurement is important and necessary in order to reassure funders that their investments are effective. It helps to ensure accountability around cultural interventions, and the extent of their impact. As Johanna Blakley goes on to describe: “Some cultural interventions are probably going awry and there’s always the prospect of backlash effects. I really see it as a moral imperative that culture change activists actually build in some kind of meaningful evaluation, just to check they’re on the right track.” Another of our interviewees, Nicky Hawkins, director of communications at On Road Media, echoed this point: “If collaborating with popular culture, we risk sharing frames at scale that are counterproductive to the long term change we want to see. We need to really spotlight the value of research

and how, when we bring it to life, it not only has visibility, but also has really productive visibility, working for us on all levels.”

Define American is a US-based culture change organisation that uses the power of narrative to humanise conversations about immigrants. It is producing groundbreaking television research on immigrant representation with the Norman Lear Center. Its latest report, [Change the narrative, change the world](#), looks at the portrayal of immigrant characters on 59 scripted television shows and surveyed viewers on how three immigration storylines changed their willingness to take action in the real world on immigrants’ behalf. Our interviewee, Sarah Lowe, director of research and impact at Define American, stated: “People are influenced by tons of things, but entertainment and news are big factors. We know from our research that seeing authentic storylines on TV helps people connect with lived experiences and moves them to action. We are tracking immigrant representation on TV and news every two years, along with audience reactions, to better understand the factors creating shifts in audiences’ attitudes over time.” We also note the work of [Heidi Boisvert](#), media impact fellow at the Harmony Institute and founder and director of a [Future Perfect Lab](#), who is exploring how interactive web, game-based and immersive pop culture experiences employing emerging technology can more effectively foster empathy.

There is a wealth of research adjacent to this field (carried out by both academics and broadcasters), including on behaviour change, the impact of fiction in promoting empathy, the science of storytelling, social

contact theory, and parasocial contact hypothesis, i.e. exploring how viewing content can reduce prejudice. We need to do more to understand these fields of research and inquiry and intentionally connect them with popular culture. This work is underway in the US with exciting, valuable results emerging.

It is also powerful to share data and research with content creators so they understand the impact their work is having, as the research report the 72 Center carried out with Color of Change demonstrates (elaborated above in section 5.2). Kate Langrall Folb, director of Hollywood, Health and Society at the Norman Lear Center, explains this as follows: “We can use that data and that research, not only for fundraising and to prove to funders that it works, but also to go to the storytellers and say, no, look, your episode really did change lives! It’s a powerful tool to use in moving the entertainment industry to understand why it’s important for them to be as accurate as possible in regard to health, science and social issues.”

The sustainability organisation Albert – BAFTA’s creative industry-backed project – works to unite the entertainment industries to make a positive environmental impact and inspire audiences to act for a sustainable future. During our interview with Albert’s former project director, Aaron Matthews, he described the support they provide to the industry: “We work with our industry to help them understand what they can do to reduce their impact on screen and behind the scenes. Sometimes there’s pushback and we’re told that they [the creative industry] don’t want to be told what to do but for the most part, our community values the insights we can bring. We do training where we go into the detail of how environmental sustainability is affecting humanity. And then we get to discuss ‘what do we want to do about it?’ We help the industry to think about what they can do, from a production and on screen point of view. Our Planet Placement score holds a mirror back to industry. It gives everyone a play book and creates accountability.” Albert has a certification programme, carries out research, produces toolkits, features [case studies](#) and holds events, which help the creative industries to explore the role they could play in minimising environmental harm and promoting a green future.

The accountability that Albert sets out to achieve is valuable, partly through its certification programme, but also through its research. This is setting a baseline for how

the industry is faring on featuring climate in programmes. Its 2019 [Subtitles](#) report concluded that climate was mentioned on-screen four times more frequently in 2019 than the previous year. The report also sets out the industry shortcomings: “While the climate issue creeps up the editorial agenda, content to support the ‘everything transition’, i.e. what is necessary to avert climate catastrophe is largely, missing in action.”

Similar research, evaluation and measurement is sorely needed around portrayal of migrants, race and racism and numerous social justice issues on UK television. The Norman Lear Center describes this work as ‘cultural auditing’, although in their interview, Blakely and Langrall Folb stressed it was not on most people’s radar until the last few years. There is some evidence of this work taking place in the field of impact documentaries. Doc Society’s [Impact Field Guide](#) and toolkit is a valuable, regularly updated resource. But this impact scrutiny is lacking across television more broadly. Simone Pennant, director of the TV Collective states: “Part of the problem we have is there is no industry wide standard when it comes to diversity. There’s no overall standard we all have to adhere to or aspire to. We need a badge or a kitemark system to help bring up standards. It’s not about wagging fingers, but gently holding the industry to account and praising good practice, we need to enrol people so we can bring everyone along for the ride.”

This issue of standards also came up during our conversations with gaming industry professionals. Karla Reyes, product manager at Square Enix, described this as follows: “Having diversity and inclusion standards and criteria can serve as a useful vehicle to increase representation both behind the scenes and on screen. For example, BAFTA has adopted BFI’s EDI standards, and I am collaborating with my team at Square Enix to author our own criteria. Some steps the industry has taken to ensure authentic representation of cultures include hiring ‘sensitivity consultants’ and eliciting feedback from experts as well as testing games with users from specific demographic backgrounds.”

A key challenge is capturing the right data and linking it to how diversity leads to better outputs, as Kish Hirani, chair of BAME in Games states: “While diversity and inclusion has become high on the agenda of the video games industry, like many other industries, we still grapple with not having good data. Our first ever industry census was only published in 2020. This points to the fact that historically, diversity and inclusion haven’t been taken seriously. We need to show why diversity makes business sense; helps build better products and creates environments where innovation thrives.”

## 6.2 A NOTE OF CAUTION

The key to good cultural evaluation is knowing what questions to ask and understanding whether and how you are measuring impact. Johanna Blakley from the Norman Lear Center explains more about the mistakes people tend to make: “People mix up reach metrics with impact metrics. For some reason people tend to think that just because somebody was exposed to something means it had an impact. The inflated numbers, the vanity metrics, those are all about reach. None of those things say anything about impact. Yet, most reports that you tend to see coming out of advocacy organisations or production companies that have created media around social action, focus on this kind of data. And they often mislabel it as impact. My position is that most people are not measuring impact at all. And there really aren't many outfits like us that actually do it.”

Iain Dodgeon, director of OKRE, raised similar questions about measuring impact. He stated: “All genres and platforms of content can and do have an impact and a role to play if you're seeking to have an impact.” He went on to say that role and impact varies: “That's why it's important to be clear what is trying to be achieved and with whom. If it's not clear, then it's hard to know whether you're adopting the right approach”.

Bridgit Antoinette Evans, the chief executive officer of Pop Culture Collaborative in the US discussed the importance of measuring the impact of the field as a whole rather than just individual organisations: “We often talk about the concept of narrative oceans. It's not about the funding of specific stories. It's about the funding of coordinated narrative oceans of content and experiences that conspire together to create the sense of new reality. To measure this, we have partnered with the University of Southern California to create a field-wide culture change learning system that is gauging the transformation of the ocean and the overall ecology of the field. We are doing this by commissioning annual studies of various coordinated drops in that ocean. We think this will create more validating and tangible evidence for people in philanthropy that the specific contributions of many field actors are adding up to the communal effect that we seek. If that system is in place, then individual projects or organisations can be released and liberated from the necessity to try and prove that they single-handedly can affect the ocean at scale.”

In section 4.3 above we refer to the importance of funder learning journeys. A central component of this is supporting donors to understand best practices in cultural evaluation and impact measurement. We discussed this in our conversation with the Norman Lear Center: “It's an uphill battle. It's esoteric, difficult work. You can't just do it internally if you're really trying to do a proper study of the impact of media, it costs money. Half of the conversation we have with a funder who is interested in

measuring impact is just getting to the point that they actually understand what we'll be measuring.” Another interviewee echoed these points confirming funder wariness about evaluation and also a reluctance to invest in research that informs content creation.

As our scene setting in section 2 shows, culture influences — and is influenced by — the political and social climate. This multiplicity of factors that are at play in cultural change can sometimes make it feel bewildering and difficult to definitively show cause and effect. But, over time, we can qualitatively evaluate cultural influences on perceptions and attitudes, replicate case studies which have led to policy changes and deepen our understanding of how and why people's behaviour and motivations shift. In our interview with Iain Dodgeon, director of OKRE, he stressed the importance of rationalising the research that has already been carried out: “A key part of OKRE's work is to identify research that has already been done and help organisations share their findings more widely across sectors. We can see similar work being done by organisations in different sectors, coming to the same conclusions and publicising them to different markets. By providing a platform for exchange we seek not just to amplify the immediate impact of that research, but also help organisations then build on each other's work, investing in genuinely novel research that can help further expand our understanding.”



## 7. TOWARDS A NEW, BRAVE WORLD: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report fills us with hope and excitement about the pop culture for social change field in the UK. There is no easy panacea for the challenges we face in achieving social and environmental justice. But, the emerging pop culture for social change field is filled with untapped promise. We must recognise its power, invest in major opportunity areas and lean in to its potential. We have made a series of recommendations throughout this report. We summarise them below along with some of our conclusions:

### **Culture is power**

Social change-makers and funders need to acknowledge the tremendous power embedded in who makes, drives and influences cultural content. The culture we consume influences how we think, feel, act and behave. Pop culture is a significant driver of change. The power of pop culture for social change can be harnessed and influenced, for good or ill. We need to ensure that the powerful tides of cultural change are towards an inclusive 'larger us' rather than a polarised 'them and us'.

### **View this work through an intersectional lens**

We view this work through a prism of intersectionality, i.e. how forms of marginalisation operate, intersect and magnify each other. An intersectional approach recognises that culture does not exist in isolation from inequalities based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ability or immigration status — inequalities that not only shape culture but have material consequences in the lives of everyday people. Working through this prism helps us address these power imbalances and strengthens solidarity across and between our sectors.

### **Connect social movements with cultural changemakers**

Grassroots social and cultural movements (such as #MeToo and TIME'S UP, Black Lives Matter and the youth-led fight against climate crisis) have global reach, influence and appeal. The amplification techniques, knowledge and experience of movement builders must inform the pop culture for social

change field. We must invest in the culture makers and cultural organisers situated between the creative industries and social movements who are already leading this work.

### **Mapping the pop culture for social change ecosystem**

The pop culture for social change field is growing and emergent in the UK. We need to map the ecosystem in order to visualise it better, help organisations and individuals recognise the value they bring to this space, explore connections and identify gaps. Any future mapping needs to take into account regional voices and players and avoid being too London-centric.

### **Under-represented voices and lived experience in writers' rooms**

Under-represented voices and people with lived experience need to be in writers' rooms, leading and directing creative outputs.

By this we mean people who are Black, POC (people of colour), women, disabled, immigrant, working-class, LGBTQ+ identified and other identities often excluded from entertainment industries. We have seen the powerful impact in scripted drama where unfolding stories can illuminate injustice, while sharing narratives of abundance and joy. This requires investment from funders, including for communications campaigns that amplify the reach of cultural content and ignite public conversations around it.

### **A cultural narratives fellowship scheme**

There is a growing body of work on framing, narratives and strategic communications in the UK. It is vital work, but at present it is not connected up to the creative and entertainment industries. Funders could do more to amplify the impact of this work by investing in connections between strategic communicators, narratives experts and the creative industries. This work needs to connect racial justice communications experts and organisers with content creators. We recommend a cultural narratives fellowship scheme, which would provide a much-needed platform for a raft of cultural strategists with differing experience and perspectives to explore and research how narratives shape and influence the culture we swim in.

### **Pop culture for social change networks**

Funders should invest in collaborative networks that help organisations working in the field of pop culture for social change connect with one another. These should focus on practical advice and support, donor-learning journeys and facilitating international collaborations that magnify reach. We also need greater transatlantic connection, learning and collaboration in this space.

### **Stretching our imaginations and future visioning**

The field of pop culture for social change has tremendous, untapped potential. It is inherently creative and innovative. Cultural content allows us to stretch our imaginations into the realm of possibility. We should see it as a practice and set of tools that allows us to envision the world we want to be living in, not just a reflection of the one we inhabit now. We must be open-minded to transformative narratives in unlikely places. It is imperative we get creators and consultants with lived experiences into game writers' rooms to shape narrative design from the outset. The vast rise in popularity of streaming platforms and the global growth in gaming are indications of the direction and speed we are travelling. Gaming, accessible technologies and interactive media are emergent, untapped areas of social change, worthy of greater research and investment.

### **Cultural evaluation and impact measurement is possible and necessary**

Pop culture can powerfully affect our attitudes and behaviour. We need to understand more about how and why this happens. We can do this by evaluating the reach and impact of cultural content. In the UK, we must learn from influential cultural change practitioners, academics and researchers in the US who are evaluating and measuring pop culture for social change effectively. We need to bring funders along on this journey. And we need to produce research that helps to establish base lines and promotes accountability. We need to do this longitudinally, so we need to make the case for long-term investment.

The fusion of social change-makers, movement builders, narrative experts, creatives and funders has the potential to be one of the biggest, driving forces of social and environmental change in our world over the years to come. We need to work together to harness the power, opportunities and potential of pop culture for social change. With concerted collaboration and adequate investment it can lead us towards a new, brave world.