A project of this kind has many inceptions before a final idea is settled on and executed. I would like to thank Mark Sealy at Autograph ABP and The Arts Council for help in providing seed funding, and Are Tanaeum for help with an earlier proposed book on Looking for Langston. While Riot looks back at the last thirty years of my life and career, it is published to accompany MoMA’s acquisition and exhibition of Ten Thousand Waves.

The following people and institutions deserve special thanks once again for their support on that project: Udo and Annette Brandhorst, Hélga D Álvarez, Maggie Chueng, Mark Cootees, Sam Deywar, Huang Fan, Jan Faul, Adam Finch, Yang Fudong, Mustafa Goksal, Thorsten Herrn, Virginia Ibbot, Linda Pace Foundation, LUMA Foundation, Simon Kirby, Colin MacCabe, Nonna Materoska, Victoria Miro, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Roslin and Tony Osey, Halu-Hung Pai, Almine Rech, Nadja Romain, Stephanie Rosenhall, Beatriz Ruf, Libby Savitty, ShangART, Tátis Swinton, Maggi Stall, Zhu Tao, Glenn Scott Wright, Jochen Zettl, and all of the production crew.

Since the premiere of Ten Thousand Waves, ART’s Alix and Mark Joye have worked tirelessly with my studio’s exhibitions team, Molly Taylor, Eli Havelky, and Vicki Thornton, to ensure the consistent installation of the work in a number of venues all over the world. Riot is forward-looking as well as retrospective: its writing has been much shaped by work conducted on my next project n/a/n/a/n/a. At the time of writing that project is not yet complete, but I am grateful already to the following people for their time, comments, and contributions: Mercedes Cabral, Bron Arca of the industrious Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Studies Program, Simon De Purry, Adam Finch, Mark Fisher, James Franco, Rania Gaskar, Candida Carter, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, David Harvey, Nina Kellgren, Diane Henry Lepart, Charlie Godet Thomas, Studio Archivist; and Vicki Thornton, Studio Coordinator. Without their special and meticulous attention to detail, this book would not have been possible. I want to thank them for their amazing commitment.

Special thanks are reserved for Cynthia Rose and her partner Steve Sampson, Cynthia sat with me over many playtime. At the time of writing that project is not yet complete, but I am grateful already to the following people for their time, comments, and contributions: Mercedes Cabral, Bron Arca of the industrious Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Studies Program, Simon De Purry, Adam Finch, Mark Fisher, James Franco, Rania Gaskar, Candida Carter, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, David Harvey, Nina Kellgren, Diane Henry Lepart, Charlie Godet Thomas, Studio Archivist; and Vicki Thornton, Studio Coordinator. Without their special and meticulous attention to detail, this book would not have been possible. I want to thank them for their amazing commitment.

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

If I see a photograph of myself from around this time, it seems to me a picture of someone who’s looking at things from a much older position. Because in my world I had to mature very quickly, there was never much chance of me remaining naïve. Early on there were two central goals in my mind: I didn’t want to live the life of my parents, nor did I want—to work in a factory or a bank. I was very determined about it; there were things I wanted to do and things I didn’t want to do. I think this was a lot about not being heterosexual, but I could also see what working in those environments did. What really started to change things for me was my O-level art class. There I had a set of extraordinary teachers—people whose conversations opened up a brand-new world. I had one teacher, for instance, who always went to Marseille in the summers and who would talk about how people, artists, lived there. Another influential teacher was Mr. Price who, during life drawing, started explaining dialectical materialism. This was my first encounter with the idea of middle-classness. All my teachers were middle-class and they were also of the left. So we were having these conversations about Marx, about Trotsky, about socialism—all while I was drawing and painting and making sculptures.

I initially grew up on the Coventry Cross Estate, a fairly
notorious housing development in London’s East End where by the time I was ten, practically everyone I knew had already been arrested. I didn’t really understand this but I could clearly see that between black boys and the police there was always some kind of encounter. I was very aware the police were not around to protect me.

My school—which was then called the Danesfield School for Boys—at Brick Lane and the Hoxton area. Now this is a center for the London art world, but during those years it was a political battleground. There had been a local wave of Asian immigration and young Bengali kids were just starting to enter schools. So there was a lot of vigilante violence in the street—an East End landmark called Kingsley Hall. It’s a very important building, one linked to the Suffragettes, to the General Strike of 1926, to the area’s whole history of left-wing politics. In the ‘30s, Mahatma Gandhi once stayed in it, and during the ‘60s, R. D. Laing had practiced there. It was through the Hall that I met a woman named Jenny Fortune.

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

After meeting Jenny, I entered a different universe. On the one hand, there were all the things happening at Kingsley Hall. Then directly across the street was the terrace we all knew as the “Acme Houses.” These were overseen by an artist-led charity that had turned them into artist housing and studios. I was very curious about those houses, so I started trying to befriend the people in them. Thanks to that, I encountered another oppositional culture. I remember once just walking into one house where an artist was giving a performance. Retrospectively I think it may have been Stuart Brisley, but he was in a bath, it was all completely black… and I remember thinking, “God, these white people are strange. What on earth are they up to?” At the same time, I wanted to know more.

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

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

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

Then, as we know, council housing and similar ways of housing oneself started to disappear as formal means of investment, became the ultimate fetish—it turned into the dominant means of securing one’s position. In the East End today, the privatization of public space is an obvious and defining feature of art’s presence. It’s largely the privatization of both the art world and that real estate, hand in hand, that has succeeded in redefining those geographies. My East End, where I grew up and where I was familiarized with the making of art, has vanished. It’s been replaced by a new, branded contemporary art— one whose deepest connections are to the market and to Mayfair. But in its original form, before artists like Rachel Whiteread and Tim Noble and Sue Webster and the Chapman brothers defined it, there was another East End. It was defined by different artistic ambitions and its “art-world” never tried to define itself against the local. I certainly don’t want to pretend that I’m outside of those changes. After all, as a kid, I dreamed my neighborhood would be gentrified. If a club like Shoreditch House had existed when I was growing up, I would have been in there like a shot. But on the flip side, how have we the Shanis? That represents the presence of capital in the city, it symbolizes the wealth that created all this modernity. Yet it’s all about the fact that while you are able look at it, or you might be able to visit, you can never really inhabit the inside.

My own formation in the East End was very different. For me, just trying to learn was difficult, requiring the day-to-day negotiation of local boundaries. Learning was also punctuated by powerful news from elsewhere,
The appreciation of music mattered as much to us as it did to our elders. But it mattered in a sense that was our own. At eighteen, I left secondary school, and I more or less spent a whole year clubbing. A lot of that time was spent at the Embassy Club in Old Bond Street, which was a bit like London's Studio 54. There I was able to check out people like Bruce Ferry and Bionca Jagger. Andy Warhol very often used to appear in that nightclub and just being around him was rather curious. It gave me clues that there were pop-cultural aspects to my own experience there might actually be some possibilities. I even remember thinking that—somehow—I wanted to be like Warhol. Warhol was a key because, with him, one had both the look and the art.

Of course I couldn't actually afford to go to the Embassy Club. The way I managed that was, on weekends I would haunt the East London junkale sales and "antique fairs." Then I would head to the King's Road and sell whatever I'd found. I sold my finds at two places, Antiquarius and 20th Century Box. I also used to buy secondhand clothes from Sidelines so I could start assembling a wardrobe of my own. All this had certain entrepreneurial aspects, in that I could look at the clothes that—in a way—I wanted to be like Warhol. Warhol was a key because, with him, one had both the look and the art.
Chapter 1
ISAAC JULIEN
RIOT

I remember one teacher said it would be more “interesting” as an artist, I wanted access to that energy. Remembrance starting with... 

Well, those facts would take me a lot longer to address. If I had talked a bit more about being black and gay. 

I’d love to see that video now, because what I did was cut analysis of the gay subtext in Alfred Hitchcock’s Gay Left out models and pages from How Gays Are Stereotyped in the Media. That was when I made my first real school, so I did a pre-foundation course at City & East London College. That was when I made my first real video, called New Gays Are Stereotyped in the Media. I’d love to see that video now, because what I did was cut out models and pages from Gay Left magazine, then add an analysis of the gay subtext in Alfred Hitchcock’s Rope (1948). I remember one teacher said it would be more “interesting” if I had talked a bit more about being black and gay. 

Well, those facts would take me a lot longer to address. They took around nine years to be able to articulate, starting with Terence (1984), then The Passion of Remembrance (1986). This Is Not an iocs Advertisement (1987), and finally Looking for Langston—But my work does have a sânism and a confrontation: it has things that are “high art,” experimental and modernist, but at the same time it retains my political focus.

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

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

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

endnotes 1. In English schools at this time, students took a set of exams called O-levels (ordinary level), usually at the age of sixteen, that determined the nature of their continuing education. These were followed by a second set of exams, A-levels (advanced level), usually taken at the age of eighteen and important for entrance to university and further education. A-levels were the gateway to middle classiness, and where I grew up, to do them was the exception.

2. They produced Matchbox model cars.

3. Vivienne Westwood’s King’s Road boutique; Antony Price in a Vivienne Westwood suit, Antiquarius was a market comprising numerous separate dealers. Its building is currently occupied by the American Antiques Company. It was near a branch of Anthropologie.

4. Malcom McLaren’s and Vivienne Westwood’s King’s Road boutique. Tony Prince’s designed were initially found at Plasa, but after 1979, he opened his own shop, also on the King’s Road.

5. 3⁄8 in. (100 × 100 cm).
When I arrived at Saint Martins School of Art, in 1980, punk rock was still very much in the air. Everyone knew Saint Martins was where the Sex Pistols had played their first concert, in 1975. Of course I’d grown up with music as an important cultural expression. But I was very into the language of punk—by which I mean the movement’s dress and its political posture. For me, the real point of punk was its DIY attitude: the principle that anyone could make, complete, and benefit from a homemade thing. Also, with relationship to dress and to styling, punk championed amalgamating elements that normally never went together. All that, of course, resonated with Saint Martins students. Back then, the influence of club cultures was dominant on the art of almost everyone at the school.1 Through London’s weekly pop music papers we knew all about the punk trajectory in the States. But there was a cultural difference between our U.K.–U.S. worlds that I think derived from English politics. For me, the importance of punk came from the Sex Pistols’ intervention in the Silver Jubilee and from the ways punk used Situationism.2 Of course, for its sounds alone, the movement had a broad appeal. But as much as I liked the dissidence of the music, it wasn’t something I would ever really dance to. Early on, I had identified myself as a soulboy. Basically, this meant you were interested in funk music and you got involved in buying specific import records—records that were quite expensive, so you had to really save up for them. Those commodities helped you to create a relationship to the culture of black America, and also, in a sense, to wider black representations. These were very significant things, because where I actually lived the landscape was so barren. Somehow, in England, this also meant you weren’t in the past. It denoted something about the advancement of black cultures, something that was being represented through the music. So, from early on, collecting albums was important. Being able to own them, being able to play them—that formed a central part of one’s new identity. A new identity that, through going to clubs such as Lacy Ladies, Global Village, and the 100 Club, became more pronounced. The ways in which we were able to congregate were important. From the mid-‘70s, we had this younger group of people trying to fashion themselves in their own modern manner, one that was opposed to the fashions taking place around reggae. Most of my fellow art
students, of course, were involved in post-punk music. So they didn’t really understand what these import sounds and their culture meant. Yet to me, that whole kind of relationship to America, and especially to black America, was exciting. It had its own kind of futuristic aspect, like “This is what black people might be in the future.” Also, I think my love of dance and movement actually comes from James Brown. Certainly it came from the idea that when you’re dancing, then you really mean something. You’re producing meaning, both in movement and in that core response to musicality—in all its tonal, atonal, and rhythmic aspects.

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

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

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

During my second year at Saint Martins, we had the Brixton riots. That was the biggest event in my new life, those riots. I had already seen their prototype during Notting Hill Carnival. Every summer Carnival took place in this emotional moment, one that was always situated between pleasures and danger. Because its displays were
threatening, this became a regular confrontation through ritual. Yet at the same time, it was extremely exciting and it gave you license to express yourself in the daylight. Rather than tucked away in the dark, you were on a public stage. There, I finally felt these violent disturbances could seem like new ways of articulating a self.

Once things got out of hand, however, there was anarchy. In all the uprisings and eruptions of the 1980s I saw that kind of powerful, disassembled energy all over. It was like Carnival had forecast the whole year of riots in 1981: a kind of powerful, dissident energy over and over. It was then that I made the choice to do Fine Art/Film at Saint Martins. So the spring of '81 also marked my first all-black artists were suddenly lumped together, which had to come up with the will to forge new domains.

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

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

The most interesting question for me proved to be: what did black artists actually want to say? What would their art look like if its internal dialogues were made accessible to a wider audience? Looking for Langston were all seen in the same frame of reference. In the groups we went on to form, like Sankofa Film and Video, all of us were caught up in that nebulous working position: either you had to think about making work of a respondent nature or you made works that could define you outside of all that. At least, those were the two main kinds of response. There was also a third, however, which was to work against the grain of all the expectations, lest you foreclose your autonomy as an artist.

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The most interesting question for me proved to be: what did black artists actually want to say? What would their art look like if its internal dialogues were made accessible to a wider audience? Looking for Langston came out of just such a conversation, one connected to black gay desire and to photography. But it was really born of thinking about the totality that belongs to the innermost life of one's consciousness. The main point was to make certain this remained the focus—and to ensure one approached the work in an artistic, poetic manner. This was a different reaction to the race-relations paradigm reinforced by the riots. But for me, those riots are absolutely where pieces like Looking for Langston come from; I don't feel they would have been produced under "normal" circumstances. Langston wasn't the first work I made after them, though: that was a videotape called Who Killed Colin Roach?

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

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

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

This was a time when politics were literally all around me. For example, I stumbled into the story of Who Killed Colin Roach? I was coming out of an East End jungle sale one Saturday when a march passed by protesting a death in police custody. It turned out that Colin Roach, the young black man in question, had lived quite near my home.
Which meant, of course, that Mrs. Roach could have been my mother, that his family could easily have been my own. This took me back to the radical workshops of my teens and the whole idea of the camera as a street weapon. So I wanted to make a work that would embody dual perspectives. One of these would be inside the black families’ reactions to this death. The other would show responses to black community organizers. I insisted that my camera be engaged in the politics, so it was positioned very deliberately opposite the traditional media. This was at a time when video was still finding its language, when video art was still somewhat undefined. Yet I was determined to appropriate those early video-art techniques to make my campaign tape. I wanted to utilize this camera taken out of an art school context and repurpose its technology for the street. I wanted to redirect the gaze of the ruling media. My real aim was to turn that gaze on the police, because, in Colin Roach, they are the people rioting.

That piece, in one way, was very much a local response, but it was also meant to contest some things I was being taught. Specifically, it was in reply to a tutor who had told me, “Isaac, no working-class person will understand these films.” Of course my works back then were just experimental films, scratches on film, really—and they were indeed quite arty. So part of me had been forced to think, Well . . . maybe she’s right. Colin Roach, however, was my demonstration against her view. It was made to say, “I can do the same work as you and I can tell a tale. But I can also make quite experimental things.” That came from a very typical kind of student rebellion, but also because I myself felt driven—specially since, by the time Who Killed Colin Roach? was done, I was being approached by Channel 4 television. This was the moment when we founded Sankofa Film and Video.6 Going into 1982, I had received a visit from Nadine Marsh-Edwards, a student at Goldsmiths College. She’d heard that there was a black student doing film at Saint Martins, so she came along to find out what I was up to. That little visit was really the start of everything; before long, with Robert Crusz, Martina Attile, and Maureen Blackwood, we were running off to meetings with Channel 4, the ACTT (an industry union), and the Greater London Council for the Arts.7

This was the first time I encountered the term “ethnic minorities.” I had never, ever thought about myself in those kinds of terms. But at the GLC, you had both the “celebration of difference” and its standardization. When it came to organizing, because of my history with workshops such as Newsreel, I already understood a lot of the ways one needed to think. I had absorbed the concept of collectives. I knew what they were and I understood how you went about forming one. I was also acquainted with the people who handled funding. Usually they were white; certainly they were middle-class; and always they thought of themselves as politically liberal. I understood that whole culture because through Noreen MacDowell, Jenny Fortune, and Astrid Proll, I’d already been engaged with it.

That’s why I joined the ACTT, as a sound recordist: once you were a member you could form a workshop, and that’s how you became entitled to apply for grants. There was a whole process, a mixture of public and private funding, but one requirement was “an integrated practice.” This meant you had to provide training, give workshops, and conduct seminars. In Sankofa we embarked on doing
all of those, but we disliked them and never really did them well. However, one of the things that developed out of the program, out of that notion of an integrated practice, was an agenda of films to make over five years. We were required to construct a remit for that amount of time. So Sankofa’s formation was always a strategy—but I think it was also a game. It was a game in which we all participated, or at least I participated while knowing it was a strategy. I don’t think I ever took it all completely seriously—too much of it was ticking boxes to get at money. Yet the ethos behind it was connected to the community. In the wake of the riots, there had been a genuine acknowledgment that voices were excluded. Those real platforms were provided for their representation. People would identify and seek out those different communities: black people, Asians, women, gays and lesbians. All this led to a large number of collectives and workshops, groups such as Ceddo, Cinema Action, ReTake, and, up in the North of England, Ambra.8

The name we took for our own, Sankofa, comes from a Ghanaian proverb. That name was given to us by Kobena Mercer, and our logo became a bird flying into the future with its head turned back—our acknowledgment of the past and of history. This also had associations with Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” the meditations he had drawn from Paul Klee’s 1920 watercolor Angelus Novus.9 I think I saw myself, in Sankofa Film and Video, as one member of an artistic avant-garde. But back then, there were a lot of avant-gardes; there were a lot of different, equally interesting groups. That’s how I first met Jimmy Somerville, for instance, because he was involved in a gay video collective. That was a lesbian and gay teenagers’ group, mostly comprised of people involved with the club night Movements. There was Movements and, next to Kings Cross, there was the Bell, a famous gay pub where you would find people like the Pet Shop Boys, Cerith Wyn Evans, John Maybury—and Derek Jarman. Theirs was another artistic milieu, one that mixed experimental film, politics, and pop video.

Back then, a real essentialism surrounded moving images. There was a big demarcation between film and video, between those people who saw themselves as video artists and those who insisted on seeing themselves as filmmakers. Video artists would only work on video—because to them that was the point, and they felt video constituted its own aesthetic. I was more interested in a cross-fertilization of forms. So, when I made Territories, in 1984, I shot on Super 8 film, put it onto video, experimented with those images, and then refilmed them in 16mm. I remained keen to disband all the categories. This was just when Chris Marker’s film Sans Soleil had been released. In that, I could see all these different aesthetic registers, such as the technical ways he was thinking about memory and how that was treated through video solarization. Sans Soleil radicalized how we in Sankofa were thinking, both about video and about documentary. Chris Marker’s work, which took a film-essay form, had the idea of wrestling with film. But he was also wrestling with the archive. Marker was grappling with video-art effects, too, but not just to have them present in a piece. That, I think, has been my basic problem with abstract film: I feel that in formal terms, it might be radically interesting, but in terms of content, it’s never radical enough.

Marker developed a formal vocabulary of his own, one that facilitates an extraordinary musicality. That’s exactly
At the end of it, however, I had to turn around and tell Colin, black student ever given one. So I spent one day there. School, Colin Young, offered me a place; I was the second in 1984, the director of the National Film and Television School, (now ordained in the Church of England).

In 1984, Guattari's thoughts about deterritorialization would represent by the same gallery as myself, Victoria Miro.

Another thing that proved provocative with Territories was a particular critique it received. I clearly remember the moment after I made that work, because I was offered a place at the London Film and Television School.

People were saying, “Well, Isaac, Who Killed Colin Roach? was great. But Territories, isn't that a little too Goddardian?”. Meaning too experimental.

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

endnotes
1. This began with the “Blitz Kids”, a group of regulars such as Steve Strange (Steven Harrington) and Marlyn (Peter Robinson) at Covent Garden’s Blitz Club known for their outrageous and androgynous dress, and morphed into the New Romantic movement; the Blitz Club—which closed in 1981—was not far from Saint Martins, in Covent Garden.
2. This year’s Silver Jubilee, celebrated in the summer of 1977, had gained an unexpected soundtrack in the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen.” Greil Marcus gives an interesting analysis of punk and Situationism in his 1990 book Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (Harvard University Press).
3. That's when I began to question the whole idea of what might seem most “appropriate” for the person who is black. In my hands, the poetic approach of Territories—its representation of black subjectivity—was suddenly somehow seen as being suspect. But in fact I was very interested in formal questions. I wanted to experiment, to create different visual auras, play with time, play within the film using factual material. I wanted to find out how things could be visually poeticized. My ultimate aim, really, was to create a style for political remembering. But works such as Who Killed Colin Roach?, Territories, and The Passion of Remembrance (1986) — essentially those were all responses to the riots. They were made in answer to certain fixed ways of looking. But not just ways of looking at black cultures; they were also involved with ways we might feel about ourselves.

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

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

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

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

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

The rioting that continued sporadically between April and July of 1981 was rooted in young people’s particular experiences of inequality. It was also configured by a dawning sense of the chronic, intractable character of the crisis and of the unholy forces unleashed by accelerating deindustrialization of urban zones. The city of Liverpool was particularly significant because of its close links to Ireland—where a “low-intensity"
war was underway—and the character of its black community—older than the twentieth century and less dominated by Caribbean settlers than the country’s other areas of settlement. Recently released government records would eventually reveal that Thatcher’s cabinet had quietly been debating the likely fate of the city if a Detroit-style strategy of “managed decline” could be adopted.

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

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

It is now hard to judge whether those events should still be considered contemporary. Social life in Britain has moved on. Amplified by the Internet, the gaudy dreamscape of consumer culture has discovered new value in iconized diversity, and convivial interaction across the axes of class, gender, and marginality is often unremarkable. The political imagination of the rioters has contracted to the point that their diffuse assault on power brings only the transient pleasures of going shopping without money. But we must ask whether changes in the politics of race, and in the way that racism conditions both culture and politics, have been sufficient to draw a line—to create a strong sense of a before and an after. To put it another way, how are we to accommodate the spectral presence of Colin Roach, Aseta Simms, Kelso Cochrane, Cartoon Campbell,
Isaac's initial step was to try to keep Colin's death close at hand. Remembering Colin and the others who have shared his fate provided a means to affirm not a closed or fixed identity but a mode of solidarity, and the precious possibility of acting in concert against injustice and the antisocial processes with which it is bound up. The footage Isaac shot of the demonstrations demanding the truth about Colin's death remains painful to watch. It shows London as gray and harsh. Today, the police still snigger when we protest, but that reaction is less frequent. The ubiquity of cell phone cameras makes smirks and abuse more of a risk. They are usually concealed behind a mask. Contempt can be veneered by the professionalism required under the neoliberal ethos of customer care, or hidden beneath the armor of military equipment: flame-retardant clothing, balacava-ed helmets, batons, and riot shields.

Now that governmental feminism sanctions the combat of female soldiers and the sacred institution of marriage is open to all, regardless of whom they desire, perhaps the long-denied possibility of being simultaneously both black and English has become, at the very least, a theoretical possibility. For now, neoliberal culture is comfortable with the idea of linear upward progress where race and nation are concerned. Not only does our sense of time and our understanding of history assume a different aspect when the absurd saga of black suffering is placed in the foreground, but the significance of racism in shaping the country's polity and, in particular, in strengthening the hateful but endlessly productive populist strand in its political culture becomes harder to overlook.

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

In preparing this essay, I was surprised to be made to remember that in my preacademic life as a journalist, I had penned an enthusiastic review of the Colin Roach film when it was first released. Watching it again today,
I still see it as a pointed piece of Du Bois–ian art as propaganda. It was part of a protracted community campaign that endures in today’s demands for an end to residually color-coded varieties of justice and police impunity. Three decades ago, I was more shocked still to find out that Isaac had discovered some angry, anonymous words of mine and folded them into the poetic commentary that flows through Territories while the world-inverting history of carnival is laid out, the butcher’s apron catches fire, and transgressive love combines with militant class feeling to demand a deeper democracy than Mrs. Thatcher’s cohorts were prepared to countenance.

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

The significance of the carnival was far greater than those problematic ethnic inclinations. In Territories, the growing power of organized sound and music counterpoints the visual montage and is articulated with it aesthetically. Our narrators sit at a Steenbeck editing machine, underscoring their responsibilities as mediators, but the DJs and MCs who make up People’s War are not positioned at that distance. Under the time-stretching impact of what we must call a dub aesthetic—one grasping the shock that only the unintelligible can communicate—the film demands to be encountered as a remix. Its repeated phrases, oscillations, and orchestrations depart from reggae; their relocation to the gray northern metropolis has opened them to the emergent power of hip-hop and what we used to call “electro.” That too is layered into the real-time revolutionary rhythms of Coxone’s Studio 1 in Jamaica.
Here is the demotic pulse of a truly populist modernism and we do “Feel Like Jumping.” Its dissident spirit is propelled by the energy of ritual repetition, of ceaseless versioning. The infrastructure, as always, is the sound of the drum, and its most insistent, compelling voice is Style Scott’s timely, machinic hybrid of funk and reggae.

The intellectual and political spirit of these exhilarating experiments must have thrived in the space between the Saint Martins art school, where Isaac had studied, and London’s black social movement against state harassment. However, I suspect that its fissile core was provided by debates in and around London’s Gay Black Group of the early 1980s—a collective of extraordinary young people whose enterprise and vision await the historians that their subsequent achievements merit. It would be putting it very mildly to say that AIDS changed the organizational priorities and strategic calculations of that political body. The epiphany of the new disease transformed everything. It worlded the local, generating new alliances and enemies, prompting new varieties of care and fear, danger and responsibility. By robbing us of so many lovely, brilliant, and insightful human beings, it produced new ways of thinking about politics and culture that could not be confined to their melancholic origins, as well as a preference for political mobilization over the work of mourning.

In Isaac’s case, the demand to savor life lived against the horizon of death yielded eventually to a larger diasporic ambition in which British blackness might start—as it had done through the export of our distinctive lovers rock reggae—to work upon and expand the creative and ethical horizons of Caribbean political culture. This was the task that he would take up in his later film The Darker Side of Black (1994).

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