

The New Normal

A Manifesto to Create a Safe Space, Free of Racism, for the Black Artist

Context

Structural racism is one of Britain's legacies to the world. It is one of the perverse results of this legacy that Britain has become home to so many communities from former colonies - who are freer and better resourced here in Britain to tell their stories, than might be the case in the countries of their ancestors.

This places a particular responsibility on Britain not just to reflect the different cultures and experiences that are part of the fabric of Britishness today, but also to support the voices who are working to undo the damage that Britain bears serious responsibility for. This work cannot be measured in percentages.

We need to build a more inclusive idea of what Britain needs to become if it is to play a real part in eradicating racism of all forms. The arts have a key role to play in this struggle.

Purpose

The purpose of this manifesto is to create a safe space free of racism for the Black artist.

To combat this problem, we must take racism out of the creative space and create meaningful change for Black creatives.

We must acknowledge that institutional racism is pervasive in the majority of cultural organisations. Action must be taken primarily by leaders of these

institutions. This change requires new learning. The status quo ('the normal') allows for racial inequality to prevail unchecked. The Black body experiences a racialised model in the arts, which we must identify and make visible so as to build a new normal for the creative process.

Dealing with racial abuse must be every theatre organisation's priority. Silence is a form of compliance with the status quo. A lack of transparency allows racism in the industry to go unchecked. Current grievance processes are ineffective, slow and have little or no consequence.

Black creatives are routinely considered risky. This is evident in funding procedures and also when Black creatives are not allowed to fail in contrast to their white counterparts. Often people making funding decisions aren't aware of the Black experience. This makes it hard for Black creatives to find organisations that will support them. There needs to be a stop in the exploitation of black creatives and our narratives to serve a White agenda.

Additionally, crude categorisations of ethnicity reporting need to be addressed: we are not all the same, lumping different peoples together as if they are is racist. Focusing primarily on colourblindness leads to the provision of statistics which suggest everything is fine when it is not. We need to know what work is resourced, what is valued and not valued, what stories are being told, whose culture is being heard or not heard. Where statistics are used, we must also record the experiences of those Artists of Colour. The emphasis should be on content and experience not percentages as the markers of success regarding representation.

Urgency

If the murder of George Floyd was the incident that made you aware of the

brutality that the Black body experiences, then you might want to consider that you or your institution have racial blind spots. Those who are our allies will be willing to combat these racial blind spots aggressively.

The current system is built from a white, patriarchal perspective. The term 'diversity' itself has a negative connotation, assuming linguistically that white is the norm. The status quo is kept in place with quotas that have no consequence for failure to comply.

If the Black experience is not part of your conversation in management, marketing and creative circles, then your institution is complicit in maintaining the status quo and you are actively propagating Black erasure.

Organisations need to hold themselves and each other accountable.

We call for:

1. **A safe space for the Black artist.** This requires the presence of equity and dismantling of white fragility. An awareness of language and how we use it is crucial.
2. **Change at leadership level:** We request that Black cultural leaders work with their white counterparts and leaders across the industry to implement new modes of working. This process must include consultation with Black artists from inception to end. Organisations must promise to develop and nurture more Black creatives in all departments especially in leadership roles. So as to create safe spaces by dismantling institutionalised racism but also dismantling elitism. It is important to create a space where we can retell classics from our incredible canon of Black British playwrights as well as new works. These stories are as much a

fabric of your history as Shakespeare and other great work.

3. **An integrated strategy to deal with bias and how to deal with Black bodies** in scenarios they might encounter: from contract making to casting, from rehearsals to tours. This could be a threefold engagement model. The first strand of Engagement Programmes is for **leaders**. In consultation with Black industry **leaders**, White industry leaders must be open for transparency. We need to identify examples of best practice drawn from Black experience across roles and share these with one another. The result must include a truthful evaluation of each organisation with a report published to include a breakdown of the makeup of staff (the board, the management team, the staff) and audiences. The second strand of engagement is for **organisations**. Diversity Task Forces should be set up in every theatre organisation and be responsible for promoting social accountability and developing strategies for changing biased behaviour. Every two quarters, these task forces will look at diversity numbers for their respective organisations and departments within their organisations, to figure out what needs attention. The third strand of engagement is for **staff**. Mentoring programs between White staff and Black Artists and Creatives, both within and outside the organisation, to counteract staff turnover, ensure organisational memory, and support the next generation's learning. This will also facilitate working side-by-side to break down stereotypes, which leads to more equitable hiring and promotion.

4. **A new independent body**, responsible for overseeing all the Diversity Task Force groups, as well as monitoring progress, accountability and developing best practices within the industry, to ensure fair treatment for all. Extensive consultation will be needed to find the right model for this. Amongst its responsibilities, this Body would oversee the development of a much-needed new racial grievance process that is expedient and holds organisations accountable

with high consequences for noncompliance. This body should be funded and supported by the Arts Councils and the unions including Equity and BECTU.

5. **The provision of a Black therapist** when dealing with Black subject matter. This must be included and budgeted for at planning stage. This should be a continued practice to ensure the mental and emotional wellbeing of Black artists within White spaces.

6. **An AntiRacism Rider** for touring which could include but is not limited to: approved digs lists (from people who have completed unconscious bias training), the organisation of a meet and greet as essential for making a Black company feel welcome in your space, an appropriate structure for incident reporting etc.

7. **An AntiRacism Policy** to be put in place by every theatre organisation, drawn up in consultation with its Diversity Task Force. They should be dynamic and embedded in everyday working practice. It should also include an Anti-Racism Allyship Policy and protections for those who speak out.

8. **A new industry way of measuring** the way institutions interacts with Black bodies and is not a tick box exercise done at evaluation or expressed as an arbitrary figure in an annual report. This will help to clearly identify actual Black engagement, cases of racism and also best practice.

9. **The racialised model Black artists experience to be identified, acknowledged and made visible.** Black artists have experienced this model: when being a solo Black body in a space; in castings; in the negotiation of contracts; in inappropriate press and marketing; through audience perception of dialect; through engagement activities; audience diversity; microaggressions, stereotyping, racial profiling, unconscious bias and an absence of organised

support.

10. **Robust strategies to dismantle this racialised model** to be put in place to support Black artists. For example, but not limited to, on a touring show this could include: additional support for a Black company on the road separate to a CSM; a weekly meeting between company and the lead producer to ensure a direct line of communication and company reps to enable easy communication between producing organisations and company around particular incidents of racism.

We recognise that we have many allies and that the work they have done as part of our struggle against racism has been and continues to be essential. However, *no one* can take their position as an ally for granted. One thing we know is that the first step in being sure that you are an ally is to have read this document in full, because only then might we be sure that you have started to hear us. This is long-term and present work for everyone which requires immediate action and tenacity.

This document is written from a specifically Black experience, and we recognise that not all Black experience is the same. We recognise that people of different ethnicities and backgrounds suffer from forms of racism and prejudice that both intersect and share similarities with ours. So, in solidarity and in recognition of our shared struggles, we hope that some of the demands and recommendations in this manifesto may be of benefit to others, and/or be adapted in ways that are specific to each particular experience. It is our common struggle to combat racism of all kinds.

If you are with us please sign here, by clicking the link:

[As an individual: I endorse this manifesto and pledge to play whatever](#)

part I can in moving forward together to create a safe space, free of racism, for the Black artist and for all.

As an organisation: We endorse this manifesto and pledge to work together to create a safe space, free of racism, for the Black artist and for all.

How this Manifesto was written

This Manifesto came out of the organic conversations that over forty freelancers had while attending a weekly zoom get together facilitated by Fuel during the Covid 19 lockdown. The brutal murders of Ahmaud Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd directed our thinking from the concerns of surviving the pandemic, towards the urgent matter of racism in the arts sector. The manifesto, put together by Nick Makoha, is a composite of the collective thinking and notes gathered from this process. Once drafted, it was shared with other theatre practitioners whose thoughts and comments were incorporated.

The manifesto was then collectively edited and finalised. It reflects and attempts to respond to some of the intimate experiences of racism in British theatre that were shared during the conversations and writing process.

Appendix

1. Racialised model

This describes how current systems and practices combine to create multiple scenarios in which Black creatives experience racism in the workplace.

2. White Fragility

As defined by Robin DiAngelo:

“A social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.” - International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, Vol 3 (3) (2011) pp 54-70.