

# Black Britannia

By John Ghazvinian

In the mid-'90s, fashion arbiters began declaring that designers like John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood had helped move Europe's center of gravity from Paris and Milan to London. Then, there were "upcoming" East End art scenes and innovative restaurants, and faint peeps of jingoistic glee could be detected in the coverage from Fleet Street. But it was not until *Newsweek's* splashy October 1996 cover asked, "Is London the Coolest City in the Universe?" that the press attention picked up a head of steam, and Londoners had a reason to read *Time Out* again. After all, now the Americans had noticed, so it had to be true.

The juggernaut picked up a predictable momentum as 1997 wore on,

**Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain**

By Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips  
HarperCollins/Trafalgar Square  
422 pages, \$35

and by May 1, the youngest prime minister since William Pitt in 1783 took office, declaring a "New Britain." Suddenly the members of Oasis were received in Downing Street as the Pet Shop Boys played official Labour Party Gay Pride functions. "Call me Tony!" blared the headlines that week, as Blair announced that he wanted his cabinet meetings to be free of the traditional forms of address, "minister" and "prime minister." It was not long before the British Tourist Authority noticed the potential cash cow that *Newsweek* had unleashed. In the search for a new BTA slogan that would de-emphasize the country's imperial past, "Cool Britannia" was born.

Of course, there was little of substance to be found in the Fleet Street rodomontade. There always has been innovative work produced in Britain, with or without catchy slogans. And Brit cool is as old as the Carnaby Street



GETTY IMAGES, CRISPIN HUGHES/PHOTOFUSION

haze of the '60s. But what was encouraging about 1997 was that (as the pun on "Rule Britannia" suggests) imperial glory was now definitively uncool. Indeed, London's pavements always have creaked under the strain of hordes of trendy young Europeans arriving from Italy, France or Sweden. Only now they come on British Airways planes whose tail-fins no longer carry the Union Jack, but "ethnic" designs like Chinese calligraphy and faux African prints, meant to symbolize Britain's new role as a global culture cauldron. (A much downsized Iron Lady Thatcher is said to have spotted a plastic replica of one of the new planes at a conference and casually dropped her hanky over the tail fin).

The Great British Public, once treated to a steady diet of images of its own racial superiority, has learned that there is a thin line between propaganda and marketing, and is being sold not on greatness but hipness. One of New Labour's most commented-on projects since it came to power is the so-called "rebranding Britain" campaign, of which the BTA and British Airways were only the beginning. The campaign, engineered by advertising powerhouse BMP DDB, is aimed at selling a new image of British design and derring-do to the world. It has a strong multicultural element. In fact, much of what has been called "cool" of late is the result of new sensibilities about race, and so

much more is waiting in the wings (drum 'n' bass artist Roni Size, for instance, or London's tabla-driven "Asian underground," which undoubtedly will be the "next big thing" in electronic music).

In 1999, as the hype peels away, books like Mike and Trevor Phillips' *Windrush* stand as powerful monuments to just how far Britain has come. The Phillips brothers do so much more than trace the history of British race relations since the arrival in 1948 of the *Empire Windrush* (the boat which brought the first 430 post-colonial

**Blair's "rebranding" campaign to market the U.K. has a strong multicultural element.**

Commonwealth immigrants to the U.K.); they also celebrate the immense contributions that Caribbean immigrants have made to British popular culture. After decades of underground energy and musical, literary and artistic production, black and Asian Britons finally feel like they are not going to be beaten walking down the street. They actually have time to publicize their own work—and Britain is that much better for it.

The strength of *Windrush* is that it mourns the pain of the early pioneers as successfully as it celebrates the achievements of the new generation. An example is the Phillips' treatment of Notting Hill, which recently has become one of the most desirable addresses in London, but whose very name was for years in Britain a synonym for racial conflict. Foiled upon initial arrival by "No Coloureds" signs in other parts of London, the first wave of immigrants in the '50s were forced to accept Notting Hill's tenement flats at inflated rates.

In a sort of weird reverse gentrification, white residents gradually were priced out of existence, as the neighborhood turned into a tense ghetto, eventually becoming the scene of historic race riots in 1958. It was only after this that some blacks realized they could seek redress of their housing woes before rent control boards, and, as the area became affordable again, radical activists and assorted bohemians began moving in. The scars of the Notting Hill riots ironically lent the area a sort of radical chic, an image which persists to this day.

The Phillips brothers deliver a delicious intermarriage of high and low narrative, making the book as informative for middle England (and middle America) as it is essential for the kids on Haringey's council houses. *Windrush* is the companion volume to last year's major BBC documentary series, and is structured around dozens of interviews of early immigrants. Everyone is there who should be—from MPs to auto mechanics, from R&B performer Jazzy B. to Calypso singers of middling fame, from community activists to *New Left Review* founder Stuart Hall. The stories range from amusing, sad or ironic to the truly unforgettable.

Some of the best moments come out of the immigrants' first arrival into England. Cold weather wreaked instant havoc on their resolve. The endless lines of Victorian row houses, each with a billowing chimney, made many think that there was a lot of work in England—in the Caribbean sun, a chimney had only ever meant a factory. And just as most English people had never seen in the flesh the black men they read about in colonial adventure books, most West Indians had never seen poor white people before. Raised

on the myths of white superiority and a bountiful mother country, they were horrified by what they found in the grim neighborhoods of postwar Britain:

I'd been a colonial all my life here, in Jamaica ... and you're used to seeing the white man boss. When you go to England ... when you find an Englishman that can't read and write, you know, it shakes you. ... I remember we landed in Scotland, and while on the train several things struck me, the first time I see white children poorly clothed. And when we stop along the siding, will be asking us for cigarettes and nylons, and that sort of thing. To see a white child begging from us, it was something I'd never dreamed of.

Though the interviews inevitably steal the show, the authors' commentary is far more than mood lighting. The

graceful introduction—a sturdy mesh of personal reflection and historical analysis—should be required reading for anyone whose parents came from somewhere else. But the authors are at their most stimulating when they meld the mundane with the monumental, allowing the traditional political narrative to dovetail with the immigrants' experiences. They perform this task with exquisite judgement. Just when you think you have read about World War II from every angle, you are treated to several stunning anecdotes surrounding the conflicts that arose when white American servicemen in England kept trying to impose segregation on the British troops, whose num-

bers included some West Indians.

While *Windrush*'s flaws are few, there is one that nags. The use of the word "multi-racial" in the title of a book that deals only in black and white is particularly disheartening to those of us British Asians—Indians, Pakistanis, Bengalis, Arabs, etc.—who grew up believing (and still believe) that we were part of the same struggle. It seems to imply that we were merely a side act, that we are part of "multi-racial Britain," but were not part of the "irresistible rise." It would be petty to lord this complaint excessively over an otherwise excellent book, but the point has to be made.

Still, *Windrush* is one of those books that has an arresting tendency to incite historical reflections and comparisons. It is fascinating, for instance, to see just how much the black power movement in London in the '60s was inspired by America's struggle. One of the most moving passages of the book is when Mike



Oozewald, black silkscreen on metal, by Cady Nolan. From **Unfinished History**, on exhibit at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art through April 4. The show features the work of 23 artists addressing unresolved controversies and conflicts of the 20th century.

Phillips talks about wanting to reach out and touch Stokeley Carmichael's face when he saw it on TV. It is sad to read this and think that America's media now offer the world a different set of images, producing an idea of "cool" that draws on the post-imperial machismo of CNN's "Showdown with Iraq," trotting out over-produced reassurances of Bruce Willis' tumescence like *Armageddon*.

Fortunately, British popular culture seems to have taken an opposite trajectory. During the heyday of the British Empire, if anything "cool" was happen-

ing in Britain, it was not the business of the BBC, and even less the business of the government. How different things are today. In an almost embarrassing display of white liberal overcompensation, the BBC declared the second half of 1998 to be "*Windrush* season," scheduling not just the "landmark" series, but six months of events and programs across the country.

None of this is to say that the fetishizing of "ethnic" art should be mistaken for progress. But one should be grateful for change when it happens. Gone from the BBC are the chipped-glass accents

of Oxford-educated reporters; gone is the crackling black-and-white newsreel footage of triumphant elephants parading Lord Mountbatten past swarthy savages. In its place, the Beeb, and now Mike and Trevor Phillips, have calmly cut through the excess hype of Cool Britannia, delivering some well-thought-out material on the cultural contributions of ethnic minorities since the collapse of Empire. ■

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# Speak, Memory

By Summi Kaipa

Ever since Adrienne Rich was anointed by W.H. Auden with the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1951, the controversial lesbian poet, scholar and political activist has gone on to write many important volumes of poetry, such as *Diving into the Wreck* and *An Atlas of a Difficult World*, winning a slew

**Midnight Salvage:**  
Poems 1995-1998  
By Adrienne Rich  
W.W. Norton  
75 pages, \$22

of coveted honors, from the National Book Award to the MacArthur Fellowship. And Rich made headlines in 1997 for declining to add to her list of citations another prize, the National Medal of the Arts—a presidential honor—on the grounds that the Clinton Administration had not done enough to save public funding of the arts. "There is no simple formula for the relationship of art to justice," Rich wrote in her letter of refusal. "But I do know that art—in my own case the art of poetry—means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage."

It is precisely this "relationship of art to justice" that Rich consistently contends with in her writing. At the outset, her latest work, *Midnight Salvage*, begins with an epigraph by George Oppen,

whose poetry also inquired deeply into ethics. This overture marks the book as an important continuation of Rich's emotional and philosophical work. The primary question Rich raises in *Midnight Salvage* is her kinship with history and politics, a phenomenon she has returned to again and again in her work. In an earlier poem, "Tear Gas" (from 1984's *The Fact of a Doorframe*), she contemplates change—finding history and the world within her own body:

The will to change begins in my body  
not in the mind  
My politics is in my body, accruing and  
expanding with every  
act of resistance and each of my  
failures  
Locked in the closet at 4 years old I beat  
the wall with my body  
that act is in me still

In *Midnight Salvage*, Rich sustains this meditation on herself as a woman and poet in a world confronted by the pull of history wooing us into forgetfulness about the changes, promises and contracts we've made:

to look through history's bloodshot eyes  
into this commerce this dreadnought  
wreck cut loose  
from all vows, oaths, patents,  
compacts, promises : :  
To see

"To see" arrives in a line by itself, underneath two colons which replicate two sets of eyes, a new gesture in Rich's poetry suggesting awareness. Rich invites us "to see," to recognize our deeds over this century: usurping the civil rights of already disenfranchised people and undermining the importance of the arts as a social force. If we "see" our lost promises to ourselves and to one another, we confront our misdeeds. The alternative, she warns, is to be susceptible to the erasure of injustice alongside history's "bloodshot eyes" where we all could become "misaid, disinvent/undocumented, unverified":

Wherever you had to connect:  
question of passport, glances, bag

dumped late on the emptied carousel  
departure zones

where all could become misaid,  
disinvent  
undocumented, unverified

all but the footprint of your soul  
in the cool neutral air

In its quest for an appropriate or meaningful vision of history, *Midnight Salvage* transcends the narrative structures that characterize much of Rich's earlier work. The two longest poems in the book, the title poem and "A Long Conversation" are less linear and story-like. These intensely contemplative pieces are rooted in collage instances that force the reader to contend with a multifarious and often solemn subject matter. The title poem