

**Fryer, Peter [1984] (2010). *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. London; New York: Pluto Press, pp. 648**

Sara Pahor

(Università degli Studi di Padova, Italia)

First published in 1984, Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* is an accurate essay on the presence of black people in Britain from the third century BCE to the early 1900s. In the preface that opens the book we read:

Black people – by whom I mean Africans and Asians and their descendants – have been living in Britain for close on 500 years. They have been born in Britain since about the year 1505. [...] This book gives an account of the lives, struggles, and achievements of men and women most of whom have been either forgotten or, still more insultingly, remembered as curiosities or objects of condescension. (Fryer 1984, p. xi)

Reprinted in a 2010 edition with a fresh introduction by Paul Gilroy, Fryer's *Staying Power* accompanies and gives the title to the photography exhibition displayed at the V&A Museum of London from February to May 2015. As Fryer's work, the exhibition *Staying Power: Photographs of Black British Experience 1950s-1990s* records the black presence in Britain, specifically in London. By looking at photography as a strategic response of permanence, this collection aims at increasing «awareness of the contribution of black Britons to British culture, society, and the art of photography» (V&A website). Part of a seven-year collaboration with the Black Cultural Archives of Brixton, where a parallel photography exhibition was on starting from 15th January 2015, the collection includes 118 works by 17 artists. With settings scattered throughout London – Brixton, Notting Hill, Hackney and South London – the photographs show scenes of everyday life, objects, hairstyles, portraits and self-portraits.

After the images spread by news media documenting the beginnings of post-war migration in Britain in the mid-1950s, Armet Francis's are among the first photographs on the black British experience in the context of a rising Pan-African consciousness. Born in Jamaica in 1945, Francis moved to London as a child. His interest in the black Diaspora led him to travel

and take pictures in Europe, Africa, North America and the Caribbean. His black and white *Self-portrait in Mirror* (1964) and *Portrait of a Little Boy, London* (1965) stress the communicative effect of the direct look – Francis’s behind a camera and a black child’s – between the photographed subject and the audience, before out-of-focus backgrounds that carry unmistakable British elements, such as a wall of bricks or a wallpapered room with a white wooden door. Especially the *Little Boy* displays an unmediated presence, a face-to-face meeting, in which the visual contact is forced, therefore subtracted to the white’s willing or fearful daily ignorance.

*Wedding Guests in London* (c.a. 1960s) and *Eva, London* (1960) by Accra-born James Barnor are both portraits which take the viewer to some samples of the black female fashion of the times. In the first shot, two black women stand on the pavement, before a telephone box. Both elegantly dressed, the women strikingly follow two culturally distinct styles. The one on the left is clothed in a shirtless white frock and carries a grey handbag which fit the Western female fashion between the 1950s and the 1960s, whereas the one on the right shows a printed  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeve outfit, typically West-African. The copresence of these two styles evoke the socio-political changes occurring in those years, namely the end of colonialism, the independence gained by Ghana in 1957 and the emergence of a Pan-African awareness spreading worldwide. In Barnor’s photographic compositions, hair is interesting as well. In particular, the woman on the right sports a wide bouffant hairstyle and in *Eva, London* the portrayed black woman wears a beehive and a 1960s make-up which tells of fermenting urban aesthetics, whose hybridization would explode in the following decades.

Hair is an important matter when discussing black aesthetics and politics. Among others, Willie Morrow’s *400 Years Without a Comb* (1973), Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), and Kobena Mercer’s essay «Black Hair/Style Politics» (1987) have explored how hair, more than skin colour, has been exploited during and after slavery as a symbol of inferiority, as a racial signifier. Practices of alteration and appropriation of this signifier have been played mostly by black women, whose natural hair has been not only «a valorization of blackness or Africanness, but a direct rejection of a conception of female beauty that many black men themselves had upheld» (Keller 1997, p. 348). It is through the significant relationship between hair, race and gender that J.D. Okhai Ojeikere’s photographs of Nigerian women should be looked at. Nigerian hairstyles – Fro Fro, Abebe, Pineapple, Beri Beri – shot in the mid-1970s and headties of the early 2000s are conceived as sculptures that for their nature can only be temporary. Still, these are photographs which objectify a cultural affirmation and, in this sense, they work as forms of resistance in the face of globalisation and centuries of diasporic movement.

Another Jamaican photographer, Charlie Phillips (b. 1944), moved in his early teens to Notting Hill, the district which became a source of inspira-

tion for a series of shots in the 1960s, later published under the title *Notting Hill in the Sixties* (1991). Some of this work displays black and white people in affectionate behaviour, offering positive frames of interracial relationships. In *The Pisshouse Pub* (1969) we see a black man standing and leaning towards a middle-aged white woman sitting at a table. The man's face is turned, hidden in the woman's hair, while she is staring at the camera, smiling. *Notting Hill Couple* (1967) is a close-up of a young white woman in a white jumper and a young black man in a grey and white shirt and a black jacket. They hold each other and look at the camera. The photograph's focus point leads the viewer's gaze to their black eyes, allowing a voyeuristic search for a love which transcends skin colour. In *Cue Club Regulars* (1966), Phillips documents one of the most important places for the black music scene on the time. During the 1960s, London was enriched by black sonorities as the Caribbean and African presence as well as the black American cultural influence grew. Owned by Wilbert 'Count Suckle' Campbell since 1962, the Cue Club in Paddington was one of the first and best known black clubs in London, where local and international artists performed, like Mabel 'Big Maybelle' Smith from Tennessee, who is portrayed in the picture.

Some years later Dennis Morris's scenes of black life expose the spatial dimension of the black presence in London. Born in Jamaica in 1960, Morris was almost 17 when his career was launched internationally, thanks to his portraits of Bob Marley and The Wailers and later of Sex Pistols. The photographs included in *Staying Power* were acquired from one of Morris' projects, namely *Growing Up Black* (2009), a collection of shots Morris took as a young teenager living in Hackney in the early 1970s and permanently exposed at Hackney Museum. Documenting interiors and the individuals who crowded them, Morris's photography displayed at V&A mostly reflects a tender, intimate look that does not really tell us about public and open spaces, and which a viewer would not locate in Hackney if not told so. *Dignity in Poverty, Hackney* (1973) and *4 Aces Club, Count Shelley Sound System, Hackney, London* (1974) are respectively taken into a room and a basement, and tell through objects, as well as through people's presence, silent stories of an alternative London, united in its communitarian dimension. These are not images of desolation, but rather of local pride. In *St Marks Church Choir Boys, Hackney, London* (ca. 1970) a group of black children dressed in their choir uniforms sit neatly on the church's benches and look away from the camera, presumably towards the altar. Only one of them, smiling to the child next to him, breaks the solemnity of the picture, inspiring a spontaneous and joyful act of rebellion. Morris's images are set in the simplicity of a resisting presence as well as Al Vandenberg's. Vandenberg, who became famous in the 1960s as the art director of The Beatles' *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover, is the author of *High Street Kensington* (1976) from the series *On a Good Day*, which accompanies the exhibition's main poster: the

portrait of two smiling black girls in coat and fur, an intimate picture whose beauty lies in its message of everyday modesty.

Jamaican Neil Kenlock (1950) moved to Brixton when he was 13. Involved in the British Black Panther movement and co-founder of *Root* magazine, his colour photography is to be understood in his political activism in Britain. Kenlock's are portraits of Jamaican people in their Brixton houses in the 1970s, in front of their TV sets, talking on the phone or standing in their sitting rooms. The objects that enrich the rooms tell of the dignity with which these people live. Beauty and pride counter-narrate local prejudices and stereotypes. In fact, as recalled by James Procter (2000), in 1970s Britain the term 'black' was taken beyond its racial and biological meanings and became a political signifier with which collectives of descendants of Asian, African and Caribbean origins identified, in order to tell their experience of shared endurance in the face of local racism, diffidence and abuse. A significant decade of growing and politically affirming self-awareness which would lead in the 1980s to compelling identitarian questions, often expressed through the search for new black aesthetics. Although cautious in sustaining a historical perspective made out of static stages, it is generally assumed that in the passage from the 1970s to the 1980s the migrants in Britain and their offspring used 'black' first as an umbrella term standing for an inclusive category in search of recognition and then, the decade after, as a «political and aesthetic signifier, characterized by difference and alterity» (Procter 2000, p. 5).

It is then in the search of a new identity that the viewer should read Normsky's portraits of second or third generations, and young migrants from Africa and the Caribbean in London in the 1980s. This youth's cultural identity was played out in their appearance. Mixing elements from disparate styles, they desired to emerge for their hybrid uniqueness, which nonetheless relied on shared cultural codes coming from the New York and Detroit hip-hop scene and objectified in Adidas shoes, tracksuits, black boots, large jumpers and trousers. In Normsky's photographs we see how religious and ethnic elements were asserting the differences among black people in Britain, reclaiming identity fractures which could set a more complex politics of representation. In *Islam B-Boys - Brixton* (1987), *She Rockers (London/Rap/Dance Crew) Shepherds Bush Green* (1988), and *African Homeboy - Brixton* (1987), Normsky displays several 'blacknesses': two B-boys wearing black coats, white caps and one of them a T-shirt of Malcom X; She Rockers, an East London band of three female young rappers dressed in branded clothes; a young black boy wearing an African printed suit, black boots and sunglasses. London youth's street style stages a context where blackness is experimented as an open, global and bombastic aesthetic category.

Born in 1962, British Jamaican Maxine Walker displays at *Staying Power* an untitled series for the Self Evident exhibition of 1995, composed of 8

photographs coupled in four lines, each showing Walker herself in different skin colours and hairstyles. From the top of the series where Walker is in her lightest version with a platinum blonde wig, to the portraits at the bottom where she wears dreadlocks and a darker skin tone, Walker's photographs 'self-evidently' play with skin tones and hair to tell us that such features do not define the person standing beneath them. Walker's work symbolizes a further stage in the understanding of black Britain as the 1990s have addressed human universality subtracting meaning to differences by serializing them. In fact, also from the 1990s is a thematic series by London and Lagos-based Yinka Shonibare, titled *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), which consists of five in-colour prints portraying Shonibare himself dressed as a dandy from British colonial times. Based on William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1733), each photograph articulates the dandy's activity at a precise hour of the day, starting from his awakening at 11 o' clock, going on with a gentlemen's meeting at 14, a match of snooker at 17, dinner at 19 and an orgy at 3. Playing with history and rewriting a British visual story, Shonibare upsets common and culturally rooted expectations, such as the role of skin colour in the relationship between master and servants. Yet putting himself always at the centre of the scenes, Shonibare becomes the constant point of reference for all the white characters surrounding him, finding a new visual language of staying power.

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