

## **Belonging and the sense of place**

Ben Kuffuor

By my estimation, artistic expression in the UK has often held a reactive position in a transatlantic conversation. Even periods of flourishing creativity like the sixties, spearheaded by the Beatles and the Stones, can be traced back to 'race' music in the United States. Our theatre was perhaps the least susceptible to this influence, however since the turn of the century one could argue that American sitcom and Sorkin-esque witty one-liners have been the most consistent hallmark of millennial playwrights. A few years back, British television sought an influence closer to home and every production slate was filled with a series that was '*The Killing* meets...' as Scandi Noir became the default base for broadcast commissioners. The emphasis on costume drama still falls in line with this conversation, as Indies are attempting to package an antiquated British ideal to work on PBS (America) and sweep up in awards season. Paradoxically, if the governing principle of American art is commerce, i.e. anyone can make it as long as they can prove themselves to be commercially viable, the UK is wedded to tradition, meaning access is only granted to those who fall in line with that lineage. The easiest way to illustrate this is to highlight that in one ecosystem an ex-WWE wrestler of Samoan descent can become a leading film star, whereas in the UK he would've had to have attended one of the best drama schools in the country, proved himself as a true thespian on stage and most importantly not be of Samoan heritage.

Humour tends to rely on cultural specificity, which is perhaps why the British stories that resonated with me most strongly at first came from sitcoms, most notably, *Only Fools and Horses* and *Desmond's*. I suspect

my interest in the former came from its tower block setting and the characters' perennial struggle to make ends meet, while *Desmond's* was the only series in the UK with a black author and a predominately black cast.

The lack of on-screen black presence in the UK meant that for most people my age, much of our belonging and sense of place was rooted in the African American experience. Although, as a grown man I now recognise that nearly all of these stories were restricted to comedy, suggesting that the full complexity of the African American experience was somewhat curbed. However, the sheer volume of content was exciting enough to make many of us ignore the long culture of black oppression and think of the States as a land of true freedom (for black artists at least). There hasn't been a black British work in literature, stage or screen that has affected me as profoundly as the best of African American content. The recent proliferation of successful and intellectual African American work will most likely cause British producers to go in search for a black British version of *Get Out*, *Moonlight* or *Atlanta*. However, to cultivate works that can provide audiences with a true feeling of belonging and sense of place, black Brits should be enabled to extricate themselves from that transatlantic conversation.

### **Benjamin Kuffuor**

Benjamin graduated from the National Film and Television School in 2011, and his first project following graduation was developed by Big Talk Productions for E4. Prior to his time at the NFTS, Benjamin's first short play was produced at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2007, and he participated in the Young Writers' Programme at the Royal Court Theatre in 2008. Benjamin has had attachments at both the Bush Theatre and the National Theatre. Benjamin is currently under commission at the Bush theatre, writing a shadow script

for Kaos (Netflix) as well as developing original pieces for Kudos, Fearless Minds and The Forge. <https://theagency.co.uk/the-clients/benjamin-kuffuor>

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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