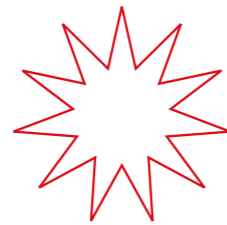RISING
ARTS
AGENCY

WHOSE CULTURE

Report Highlights

June 2021

Exploring the cultural engagement of young POC creatives in Bristol

CONTENTS

We are Rising Arts Agency, a micro-agency based in Bristol that exists to support and advocate for the wants and needs of young people. Led by young creative thinkers, our agency's mission is to empower people to collectively aspire, provoke and mobilise towards radical cultural change.

Report compiled by Roseanna Dias, Fatima Murtala Safana, Asiya Sutton, Elinor Lower and Rosa ter Kuile

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RISING ARTS AGENCY

INTRODUCTION

This report documents our *Whose Culture* project (2018-2020), a co-produced action research pilot funded by Bristol City Council. It focused on mapping and understanding the cultural engagement and experiences of People of Colour (POC) aged 16-25 in Bristol who are underrepresented in the sector as audiences, employees and creatives.

Through this work, we wanted to understand how we can make the city's creative and cultural networks more inclusive and representative of young people of colour.

This report speaks to that vision, sets out our recommendations, and shares what we've learnt along the way. In the context of 2020's Black Lives Matter uprisings and the impact it is having on our team, community and conversations in the sector, as well as 2021's Sewell report denying institutional and structural racism, this work feels more important than ever.
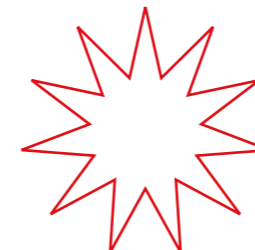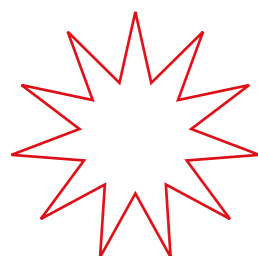
Read the full report here

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Working with young POC groups and individuals, Creative Producer Roseanna Dias, Social Media Manager Fatima Murtala Safana, and the wider Rising team developed a programme of online and offline activity to initiate conversation with young people.
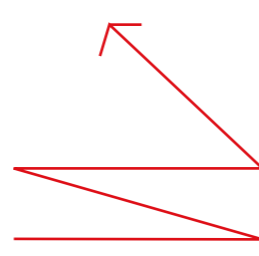
Through *Whose Culture* we aimed to:

Bring young people together to connect and have conversations about creativity, culture, identity and belonging – on their terms
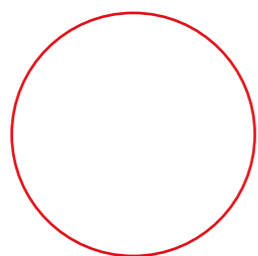
Collect data and learnings about cultural experiences in Bristol, what young people want to change and how we could support them best
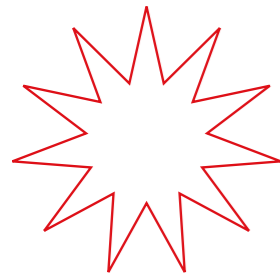
Create paid work opportunities and pathways into the creative sector

We explored various models of youth engagement, co-production, data collection and community building to deliver:

→ Eight community workshops featuring creative facilitation and guest speakers in four priority areas in Bristol (Whitchurch Park, Southmead, Barton Hill, St Pauls)

→ A celebration event including supported networking, performances and DJs

→ A lab exploring Human-Centred Design methodologies

→ Film and photography collaborations

→ Online support and events for two Rising exhibitions *Throwing Shade* and *Why Are We Not Here* centring POC experiences

→ Talks and events such as *Black Women 100*

→ Recruitment and outreach at events like Yo! Arts Fest

→ An online survey

→ Social media campaigns

→ A short film which screened online and on Millennium Square's big screen

→ Four steering group meetings

→ Models, approaches and opportunities for embedding *Whose Culture* learnings and principles into all of Rising's work

→ *Whose Culture* artists were part of a public and sector-facing campaign #WhoseFuture

WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

> " For local arts organisations, next-to-no data exists on people of colour's cultural engagement

Research from the Equality Trust shows a direct correlation between inequality and lower levels of engagement in publicly funded, institution-led cultural activity.

Despite Bristol's strong creative and cultural sector, audiences, staff and producers of colour remain disproportionately unrepresentative of the city's cultural makeup (which is 16% POC).

For young people of colour it can be difficult to be in and enjoy cultural spaces where they don't see themselves reflected.

When this work began in 2018, for local arts organisations next-to-no data existed on people of colour's cultural engagement, meaning there was a lack of evidence to guide them in their engagement work.

We ran a pilot workshop in collaboration with the **Jean Golding Institute**, which illustrated the huge disparity between what cultural organisations were offering and what young people were engaging with.

In order to deepen our understanding of this as an agency and a sector, we designed *Whose Culture* so we could open up a

conversation with young people, asking:

→ **What kind of cultural activities do young people of colour enjoy?**

→ **What do they want to do more of and where?**

→ **What do they think about the current cultural offer in Bristol provided by the city's institutions?**

→ **What do they want to see done differently?**

→ **What do they want to happen in the future?**
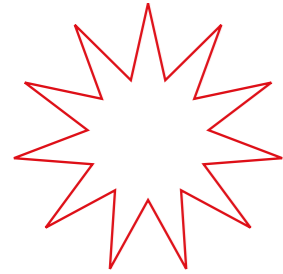
→ **What creative support do they want more of?**

→ **How can we amplify this conversation?**

OUR PROCESS

The way we work is not linear – we create in dialogue with our community and invest time in relationship-building.

We support community members to have agency over engagement opportunities so that powerful new possibilities emerge. This approach is still not the norm but is at the heart of the work we are trying to do within Rising. These are some of the steps we took as part of our process for co-creating *Whose Culture* over the two years.

Generate Insight

→ The *We Are Here* campaign was a way of taking up space and connecting with more young POC in Bristol.

→ Our survey revealed insights into belonging, representation, space, resources, experiences and attitudes of young POC in Bristol creating and engaging with culture in the city.

Expand Opportunity

→ *Whose Culture* has taught us a lot about what young POC creatives in our city want and need from us — and the wider sector. A big part of the work was identifying and opening up opportunities for them to get involved in collective artistic practice on their terms.

→ Young POC creatives want opportunities to network, to feel relaxed in creative spaces, meet other POC creatives, and be given opportunities to lead.

Nurture A Network

→ We hosted small but mighty community workshops

→ We collaborated with critical friends and got the Rising family together

→ We got personal and political on social media
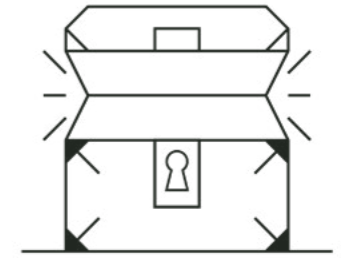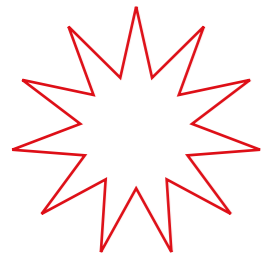
→ We were led by our community

Share Learning

→ This report shares our process, learnings and the work of our community and forms the basis of ongoing conversations about how we do this work.

Do The Work

→ We are constantly reflecting, learning and evolving, and as much as possible, sharing our journey along the the way.

TERMINOLOGY

Terminology and language has shifted and changed throughout the course of this project - and it will continue to do so after this report has been published.

We have chosen to use the term People of Colour (POC). In Beatfreaks x National Youth Trends report Time And Time Again (2021) they offer this explanation, which resonates with us: "We draw People of Colour into one collective group. This is actively not an effort to homogenize their experience, but is rather an attempt to collectively understand the methods through which People of Colour are similarly (and differently) minoritised in the UK, by the actions of a white dominated society. People of Colour is a phrase which flips the narrative from definitions that define this group by negation, or what they are not (ie. 'non-white') to actively centring what people are. Being 'of colour' inverts the power relationship by othering whiteness."

We also use the term "inclusion" in the report, which has been used in the creative sector to mean the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded. This term is helpful for speaking to sector audiences, but we see it as increasingly problematic. We want an equitable sector - this means 'including' POC in a broken system is not enough - we want the whole system to be redesigned from the roots up.

Artwork by Jasmine Thompson (top) and Nick Ogri (second from top), Photos from a Whose Culture *gathering (middle), Interactive Artwork by Donnell Asare (bottom two) all for Rising's* Why Are We Not Here? *Exhibition (May 2019).*

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS
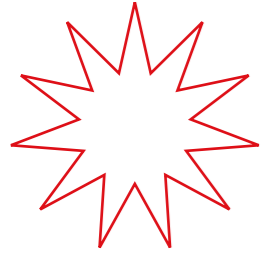
Belonging in Bristol's Institutional Cultural Scene as Creatives of Colour

Young POC recognise that there is a lot of potential in Bristol's cultural scene but there is also a lack of authentic opportunities. Whilst this inspiring city is filled with inspiring people and projects, there is a deep-rooted distrust of institutions based on previous experiences. Respondents talked about Bristol institutions not recognising the talent in their city. They talked about the barriers they face in an industry that does not consider their needs or especially care about them and their longer-term careers.

They spoke about the lack of connection and respect they frequently experience in predominantly white spaces. They also talked about how they were concerned about their work and identity being tokenised or appropriated.
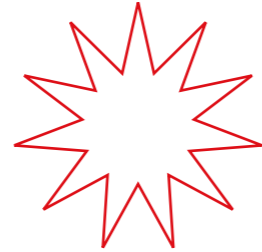
You Cannot Be What You Cannot See

Young POC spelled out the frustrations of being pigeonholed into entry-level development and internship programmes in the sector. Many of them are ready to lead or already have their own creative businesses. As a result of these schemes and other exclusionary factors in the industry, they do not see institutional spaces as a place for their talents. Instead, they are creating their own spaces which support POC communities in Bristol.

If Bristol's sector wants to thrive, it must make space for young POC creatives to lead (and be listened to and respected) within institutional spaces.
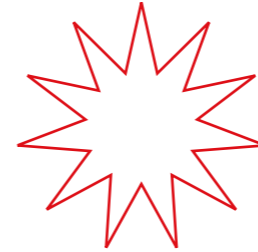
Creating Our Own Spaces Which Celebrate Cultural Difference

Respondents talked about the importance of being able to have their own young and/or POC spaces for creativity. They want spaces in which they can connect, share experiences and feel safe. These spaces for POC should welcome those from all ethnicities and backgrounds, as well as people with mixed heritage, who sometimes feel like POC spaces are not for them. Respondents also talked about wanting to see more art for and by South Asian, East Asian and Latinx creatives.
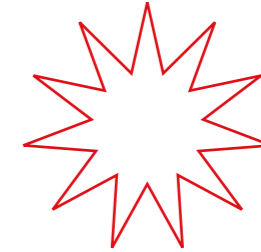
We Need Physical and Digital Spaces in which to Connect and Inspire Each Other

The importance of creating both physical and digital spaces in which young POC creatives can feel seen and see others—and be the source of their inspiration and empowerment—is crucial for supporting their growth. In the survey we asked respondents if they had a message for Bristol's young POC creatives, and their comments demonstrate the important role Rising and the city have in amplifying the messages of inspiration, encouragement and motivation, and encouraging opportunities for connection.

LEARNINGS

We learnt a lot from this project and we want to share it with you:
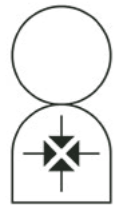
Prioritise Depth

We created intimate settings to have some very deep and personal conversations around the themes of creativity, culture, identity and belonging. Sometimes we felt that we had 'failed' because our numbers were low. In these moments we had to understand that our metrics needed to shift to align with what our community needed.

As American writer, women's rights activist and black feminist adrienne maree brown says, "We need each other. I love the idea of shifting from 'mile wide inch deep' movements to 'inch wide mile deep' movements that schism the existing paradigm." We prioritised depth of engagement and connection to build strong bonds with individuals. In doing so, we went against traditional arts sector forms of engagement which position young POC creatives as human resources to be used or numbers to bolster reporting.
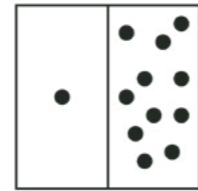
Less is More

We were very ambitious. To begin with, we spread ourselves across four areas of the city; three of which were totally new to Rising. This impacted our ability to engage with partners across all the areas.

We should have given ourselves a longer lead time for community engagement work. Spending more time going to groups and making ourselves known would have helped with recruitment, but this was outside the scope of the project timeline and the team's capacity. Throughout the project we also tended to over-programme workshops and didn't get through all the activities. We learnt how important it was to protect space for people to be late, talk, connect, and have a rest.
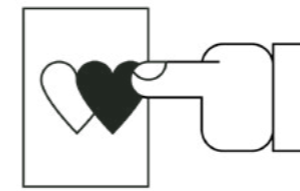
Culture of Care

Taking our time to build relationships and a sense of trust was integral to the work. This was not directly addressed in the bid, but it was a common theme throughout each stage of the project. This approach helped to break down the cultural block between many young POC and the sector. We became a caring ally for them in those spaces: they invite their friends, they have good experiences, they get paid for their involvement. They have agency in developing their own opportunities, they see the changes they wanted taking shape, they lead the way. All of this helps build the case for choosing creative pathways to those who might not see the sector as a viable career option.

Terminology is Tricky

When we started this project, People of Colour (POC) was still a relatively unknown term outside of the creative industries and scholarship in the UK. We found that using BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) resonated more with people—but only when it is written out, unabbreviated. Terminology, how it is used and who uses it continues to change. So, we continue to monitor it and make informed decisions to adjust where necessary—ideally in dialogue with the people and communities it affects. After the huge societal changes and challenges of 2020, this feels even more important.

LEARNINGS

Think About Timing

It's hard to find the right timings for this kind of work. In October (Black History Month) a lot of our crew were already very busy with events (delivering or attending). In November, some young people are busy revising for mock exams. Autumn, too may not be the best time to start engagement work, because the sector is already saturated with events, offers and work opportunities, particularly for young Black artists.
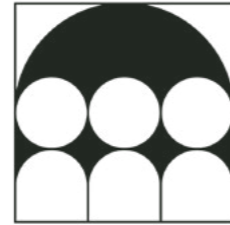
Embrace Shifting Demographics

Over the course of the project it became clear that a lot of POC creatives over 25 wanted to engage in our work and were feeling frustrated that there was a lack of support for them in the city. Partly because of this project, Rising decided in 2020 to expand its remit to 18-30 year olds. We also found it difficult to connect with 13-17 year-olds in person without doing extensive work in schools and colleges. We had greater success connecting with younger young people online, but we learnt that they tended to consume our content but didn't want to participate. It is important not to undervalue these interactions, even though they didn't necessarily match what we 'wanted' or expected. Each person we connect with is important to us and is welcome to engage whichever way suits them best.
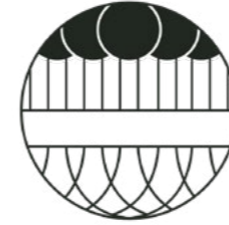
Spaces to Bring Our Authentic Selves

We learnt how important it was to provide multiple points of entry into and ways for people to engage with Whose Culture. Most importantly, we learnt what it means to hold spaces for people to come together, speak their truth and deeply listen to one another—both as creatives and as POC individuals.

During this project we learnt that we wanted more safeguarding and training to hold these kinds of spaces. Through our current work in this area supported by Resourcing Racial Justice, we are connecting with POC-focused mental health organisations.

"

Be you, you are more than a colour! You have so much more to share with the world. Dont get pigeon holed, particularly by those who may profit from it!

– Whose Culture Survey Respondent

"

Don't let your ethnicity dictate what you do. If you don't see yourself represented, go and be that representation.

– Whose Culture Survey Respondent

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has shared what we've learnt through *Whose Culture*. Rather than make recommendations that may or may not work for you (we're all doing this work so differently and in different contexts) - we wanted to offer some prompts for reflection, so that you can come to your own conclusions. You could spend some time doing this alone or with others - you could write, speak, draw - whatever will help you go a bit deeper. Make the time. **Do The Work**. And if you want to speak with us about what comes up for you, get in touch.

BE PART OF BUILDING THE FUTURE WE NEED.

Join the Rising Alliance: Support us on the regular
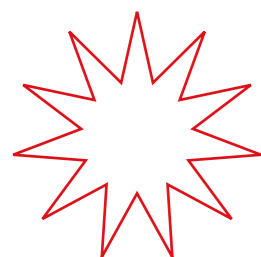
Leadership

Whose Culture showed young POC want opportunities to lead within cultural organisations - they hold the insight, experience and strategies we need to activate real change.

What are you doing to provide authentic opportunities for young POC creatives to lead, on their terms?

(and let's be real, we're talking about opportunities that don't tokenise, aren't short lived, and which young people have agency over)
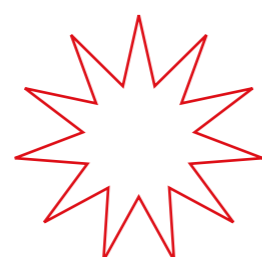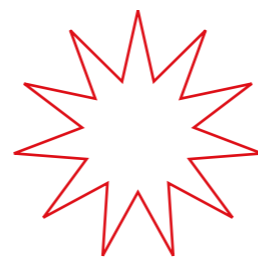
Resources

Young POC want access to free, flexible spaces where they can come and create as individuals and in groups.

What spaces and resources could you provide to young POC creatives to use, on their terms?

*(and how could this offer be sustainable over time?)*

Culture

Whose Culture illustrated how institutional understanding of "culture" needs to change. Culture isn't created and experienced only within organisations or buildings. It's happening in bedrooms, online and in the streets. Covid-19 has fast tracked many people's understanding of this.

How do you define "culture"? What are your assumptions about what it is, where it happens and who it involves?

*(having read the report, does anything need to change?)*
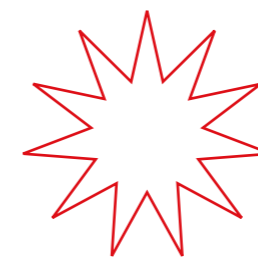
Collectives

Young POC are making their own networks, spaces and platforms for their creativity. They are also looking for opportunities to connect with each other. They might be making work about their lived experiences or definitely not be interested in doing that.

How do these things make you feel? What could you do to support these collectives?

(get honest about this - and in terms of support, it's good to think long-term and consider adequate resourcing, power dynamics and labour - is the 'opportunity' really an opportunity?)
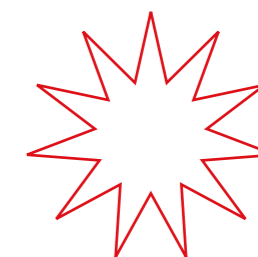
Accountability

Whose Culture lifted the lid on how young POC creatives publicly funded culture in Bristol. It's time for the city to listen, learn and adapt. The "Tell me more" section of our survey in particular reveals the pervasive issues in our sector.
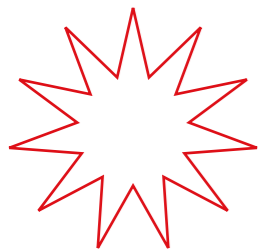
Do you think you've contributed to any of those issues?

What might you do differently now?

(and how will you hold yourself accountable?)

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As we write this, reflecting on the last two years, what stands out the most is how much things have changed, and how quickly it's happened.

The last year has been a ride. We've experienced intense pride as we've seen our incredibly talented and resilient community stand up again and again for each other, uplifting new work, celebrating successes and uniting against discrimination and abuse. We've created spaces for healing and calm in the aftermath of trauma and we've continued to stand together to fight against systemic oppression. It's what we're here for. The team has grown — from three people at the start of 2018 to seven in 2021. We're no longer a ragtag bunch of freelancers; now we're a ragtag bunch of PAYE employees! This has brought new opportunities to fully embed our project teams into the core of the agency, fully connecting all of the disparate strands into one complementary whole.

So we've grown professionally, but we've also grown in profile. From Whose Culture grew our immensely successful #WhoseFuture billboard campaign which catapulted us into a national spotlight - and we're about to launch our second #WhoseFuture campaign.

We've begun to push for change at a national, strategic level. And we're being recognised for our work. In 2019 we were nominated for a SPARKies award, celebrating the best in tech and digital in the South West. Rising was also a finalist for the National Diversity Awards, and won Voscur's Young Community Leader Award.

So what's next?

Well, we were awarded a grant from the Resourcing Racial Justice fund towards our work challenging exclusive structures—and some inward-facing critical thinking too. We have been increasingly investing in our POC communities: commissioning, platforming and championing their creative work. We will continue creating specialist spaces and support for POC artists both on and offline. We will continue influencing strategic decision-making by equipping our community to take up space on boards and push institutions to take anti-racist action. We are also continually inspired by the incredible people in the city who are pushing for change and creating new spaces and opportunities - like those over at CARGO, Bristol African Caribbean Culture Space, and many others.

Rising and our communities are playing an important part in radically shifting our city and creative industries towards true cooperation and inclusion. If culture is a reflection of our society, the toppling of Colston's statue was a powerful symbolic act. A year on and young people in Bristol are still committed to fighting racial injustice. We are seizing this momentum, galvanising our community, reflecting, and taking creative action to bring about meaningful, transformative social change.

THANKS, AND THE REST

The team would like to acknowledge the hard work, talent and insight of the following people without whom this project would not have existed:

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Kirtis Clarke
Michael Jenkins
Mikael Techane
Malizah
Jasmine Thompson
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Joêl Daniel
Kiara Corales
Lily Green, No Bindings
Liz Chege
Luke Emery
Mohamed Jama Hassan
Ngaio Anyia
Olamiposi Ayorinde
Olumide Osinoiki
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Solomon O.B
Stacey Olika
Tarim, Media Playgrounds
Tom Metcalfe
Will Taylor
Zahra Ash-Harper

And everyone else who supported the experimentation, risk-taking and fun!

Read the full report here

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Support us on the regular