
Paul Davies, *Welsh Not*, 1977. Courtesy: Paul Davies Estate

# GETTING LOST

BY BEN EASTHAM

The question of who has the right to speak on behalf of whom, and how or whether artists should lend their support to causes that are not their own, has been a feature of recent protests against the exploitation by white artists of black suffering and the abuse of power by men in the art world. These controversies have made abundantly clear—it should already have been clear—that specific forms of oppression cannot adequately be articulated by those excluded from them.

This idea of "belonging" derives from Aimé Césaire's rejection of Jean-Paul Sartre's attempts, in his 1948 essay "Black Orpheus,"[1] to figure black resistance as one expression of a universal class struggle. Césaire argued that this neglected and thereby diminished the specifics of that struggle, pointing out that black subjectivity is shaped by "a situation in the world that can't be confused with any other… problems that cannot be reduced to any other problems… a history constructed out of terrible misadventures that belong to no other."[2] The implication is that, by translating those experiences into his own language (or, perhaps more accurately, what Ferdinand de Saussure would have called his *langue*) in order to fit his own ideological agenda, Sartre is guilty of silencing them.

However reassuring it might be to think that all forms of oppression are symptoms of the same root problems, and that the experience of one entitles you to speak with authority about the other, doing so risks effacing the differences that qualify another's suffering. The endorsement of a movement from a position of power—even to the extent of articulating solidarity—resembles assimilation. And so even well-meaning attempts to express solidarity and find common cause can read like attempts to "own" or "universalise" them.

The experience of racism, to take the clearest example, is nontransferable. This remains the case no matter how capacious an artist believes their capacity for empathy to be, nor how firm their faith in the potential of art to inspire fellow feeling. Having accepted that presuming to represent the suffering of others is misguided, the next question might be how it is possible even to assert solidarity with that suffering. Does any gesture—however well-intentioned—across a power differential risk downplaying the conditions that underwrite that inequality? We might take for a topical example the hasty assertions by men on social media that they "are feminists" and "stand with" the #MeToo movement. These seem not only to take for granted that this is an insurgency in which they are invited to participate, but also that a public statement of support pre-empts criticism and precludes any serious self-examination. The dilemma is that while they (I should say we) might be better advised to keep their counsel and simply listen, to do so risks being interpreted as quietism or even a tacit acknowledgment of complicity. Which might also apply to the recent proliferation of works of art that more closely resemble sloganeering statements of political affiliation or resistance.

In what risks becoming a lapel-pin culture of performed solidarity, there is legitimate suspicion of the hollow indignation expressed by artists hitching their wagons to the latest movement. When I read that anti-Trump works were selling well at Art Basel Miami Beach, my first reaction was that a marketable "aesthetics of protest" risked overshadowing those artists (and there are lots of them) whose work exposes systemic injustices rather than simply decrying their most egregious symptoms. Furthermore, that there was something narcissistic about artists in positions of relative privilege electing themselves to defend communities whose particular grievances they were not, in certain cases, willing to entertain. When artists declare affiliation with a demographic to which they do not "belong"—suffering in which they do not participate—in order to accrue capital, whether cultural or financial, they undermine rather than advance the cause.

Yet it is difficult to escape the feeling that the particularism this entails is, when the global circumstances demand the formation of the broadest possible coalitions, untimely and even defeatist. That an individual should refrain from aligning themselves with resistance to injustices that, to return to Césaire's phrase, do not "belong" to them seems to disallow any kind of solidarity. The extension of this dispiriting logic suggests that we are committed to an ever more fragmented culture, in which even gathering points like #MeToo are suspicious because they conflate different types of harassment.

I don't pretend to have answers to these questions. But a forty-year-old photograph might offer one means of thinking around what it means to express solidarity in the field of contemporary art, and even offer a potential model for exchange and community building. The image captures an encounter between two artists, one of whom is effectively protesting against the other. The specific issue at stake might strike some as trivial but, while I'm disinclined anyway to assign degrees of importance, the purpose is not to imply any equivalence between this and other issues. The example is useful—if it is useful—at least in part because it is to some degree removed from current sensitivities.

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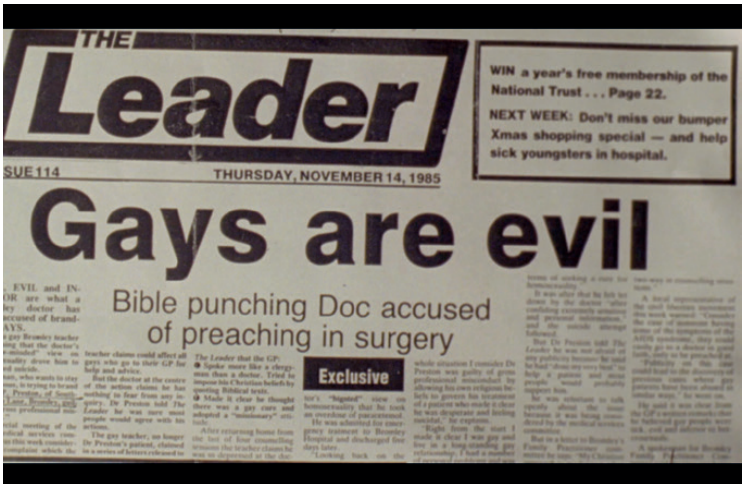
I first came across this black-and-white photograph at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. Two men are confronting each other in the middle of a field; between them is a small blackboard supported by an easel on which four lines of chalk writing are visible. In the background a man in broad tartan flares strides toward a street of stalls and tents, while a woman in a headdress and a grinning boy in a carnival paper cap are among the small audience to the encounter.

Of the men in the foreground, one is wearing a striped white shirt rolled up at the sleeves and wide black trousers, has short dark curly hair, and sports round, metal-framed spectacles. He holds above his head, in the attitude of a weightlifter at the top of his lift, a wooden railway sleeper into which the initials "W. N." have been roughly carved. He is staring into the eyes of a distinguished-looking man with swept-back salt-and-pepper hair in a sharp blazer and bootleg jeans who stands about six feet away. This man, who bears a passing resemblance to the poet Ted Hughes, seems to be shouting something at Atlas and his sign. The writing on the blackboard reads, as far as I can make out,

**WELSH NOT**
**In 1870 English was**
**systematically imposed on**
**Welsh schools. The aim**
**was to destroy the Welsh language.**

The two men are in postures of what looks like aggression, chests pushed out, feet planted wide apart.





Juliet Jacques, *You Will Be Free* (stills), 2017. Courtesy: the artist

A conversation with a well-informed invigilator, followed by a little research, revealed that the photograph was taken in 1977 at an exhibition of international performance art staged by the Welsh Arts Council as part of the Eisteddfod, an annual festival of Welsh cultures with an emphasis on national language and identity. The initiative was controversial, not only because a program of avant-garde performance art does not seem obviously to advance the cause of Welsh culture to which the Eisteddfod is devoted, but also because it was programmed by a curator from London who neglected to include any artists from Wales. So a local artist staged a protest to draw attention to the plight of the Welsh language and the culture to which it is integral, and the implication in their decline of a globalized art establishment.

The man holding the sign above his head is Paul Davies, who took inspiration for his protest from the boards inscribed with "W. N"—standing for "Welsh Not"—that nineteenth-century schoolchildren were forced to wear around their necks if caught speaking their native language. Having learned about the absence of Welsh artists from the event, he made an oversize replica out of a railway sleeper, turned up at the Eisteddfod, found a spot to stand up the blackboard that outlined his case, and hoisted the plank over his head. The implication is that the official program was a form of cultural imperialism on behalf of a remote power structure, comparable to the promotion of English over Welsh by a government based in a foreign city. On the third day Mario Merz, who had just finished performing a piece for piano, laser beam, rose petals, and coal sacks, came to find him.

Above - Juliet Jacques, *To Be Free*, 2017, *Speak Through You*, Hot Wheels Projects, Athens, 2018. Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi
Right, from top - Jesper List Thomsen, *The Body, The Body, The Tongue; The Neoliberal I; Blackbirds*, 2018, reading extract from a work in progress, *Speak Through You* at Hot Wheels Projects, Athens, 2018. Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi; Cally Spooner, *United In Stomach Flu, London Weeps*, novel in progress, reading, *Speak Through You* at Hot Wheels Projects, Athens, 2018. Photo: Alexandra Masmanidi

What happened in the scene captured by the photograph is the subject of some dispute. One version is that the Italian artist angrily confronted his Welsh counterpart and publicly denounced him for distracting attention from the official program. For the purposes of this text, we might allegorize Merz as representative of the established power and Davies as the figure of an oppressed community.[3] In which case the wider symbolism is clear, and would make the photograph a touchstone for anyone inclined to argue that the whole institutional system of contemporary art—from art schools to commercial galleries and state-funded museums—is skewed against local practitioners and minority cultures, which are not only neglected but actively disdained.

But this account of the event, and the reading it supports, is contradicted by other reports. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Eisteddfod, Ifor Davies—a close friend of his namesake artist—wrote that, as Merz approached Davies, the Welsh national anthem was being broadcast over the crowd through loudspeakers. Merz, who didn't speak Welsh but was determined to express his support, attempted some "phonetic improvisations" of "Hen Wlad fy Nhadau."

As someone who grew up on the Welsh borders, was introduced to contemporary art by a girlfriend at art school in Wrexham, and remains suspicious of the intricately networked art world even as I become more implicated in it, I want very much to believe this latter account. That the vanguard Italian artist would join Davies in song in a Wrexham field seems to me not only wonderfully funny—Welsh is notoriously difficult for nonnative speakers to understand and pronounce—but also admirable.

The photograph offers some supporting evidence for this version of events. That this was a surreal rather than an antagonistic encounter is borne out by the watching boy's hilarity, the woman's air of bafflement, and the bemused smile playing on Davies's lips. More circumstantially, it is also difficult to imagine that Merz, who as a teenager was imprisoned for participating in the antifascist resistance during the Italian occupation, would be so ignorant as to shout down a protest made on behalf of an oppressed culture.

For the purposes of this text, let's assume that Merz was singing along. By lending his voice to a protest against a system in which he was complicit, he is both vocal—in the sense of amplifying the song—and silent, in the sense that he does not seek to interpret, represent, or appropriate the sentiment expressed by it. Crucial to the legitimacy of the gesture, and the possibility that it might offer a model for other expressions of solidarity, is this valiant and necessarily doomed attempt at a language in which he does not "belong."

Erica Scourti, *Lost to the Phosphorus,* 2017, performance at Somerset House, London. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Dan Wilton

The terms of this gesture take us back to Césaire's criticism of Sartre, which rests on the principle that social rules and the relations they dictate are embedded in language. The experiences of those excluded from that society cannot, therefore, be expressed in that language without distortion. The argument in favor of the literary mode that Césaire called *négritude* was that it better expressed the embodied black experience by upending conventional French syntax, thus slipping the racist categories allotted to it (Hélène Cixous would later call for an *écriture féminine* based on the same disruptive principles). Sartre's essay was written as the preface to a collection of black and Malagasy poetry, and seemed to Césaire to reframe black experience in Sartre's own language for the purposes of his own cause, both of which are presumed to be universal.

If language is an expression of identity, and translation is appropriation, then it follows that the most effective way to express support for another's cause is by amplifying words and sentiments that must remain foreign—in both the literal and metaphorical sense—to the speaker. This is an awkward position to take, and requires a willingness to relinquish control over the discourse: rather than seek to understand a grievance on his or her own terms, the speaker must be prepared to take the legitimacy of the cause on trust. That Merz looks faintly ridiculous is to his credit—these humiliations are familiar to those forced to express themselves in languages prejudiced against them—and illustrates that he understood the imperative of submitting himself to a cause rather than taking it over.

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I was reminded of the exchange between Merz and Davies when reflecting on an evening of performances entitled *Speak Through You* in Athens, a city that has recently been the subject of much dispute around the practicalities of speaking with—or learning from—others. Featuring performances by Ioanna Gerakidi, Juliet Jacques, Erica Scourti, Cally Spooner, and Jesper List Thomsen, the event considered how the "embodiment of different perspectives and voices" (as Scourti described it to me) might facilitate the formation of communities across physical and psychological boundaries.

Hosted by the project space Hot Wheels and organised by Gerakidi and Scourti, the event returned in different ways to the issue of how control is exercised through speech and text. For *Lost to the Phosphorus* (2017), Scourti moved through the darkened gallery space marking audience members with an "evil eye" that marked them as included/excluded from a group, all the while reciting a text in Greek, English, and a creole of the two. Addressing inequalities of access, the politics of belonging, and the relation between the sensible and the intelligible, Scourti's work seemed to me (who was by virtue of not speaking Greek excluded from much of it) to cut across languages in order to break down the hierarchies embedded in and enforced by them. Jacques' *Sertraline Surrealism* (2017), meanwhile, was delivered as a monologue. Encompassing different voices and states of consciousness, the recital ended with the acknowledgment that all writing demands that the author relinquish a degree of control over the characters and scenarios she represents.

Both of these performances considered what it means to lose oneself in language, and how we exercise power through (and are ourselves controlled by) words. In their attempts to slip between different registers and subjectivities they engaged in a creative strategy that Rachel Solnit has called "getting lost"—of entering a space (physical, psychological or linguistic) that is unfamiliar in order to forge a new path out of it.[4] An extension of the same principle is that in order to empathise with the experience of another you have to enter the space in which they live, without attempting to colonise, author or otherwise map it.

It is this entry into an unknown space, a language in which he is alien, that elevates Merz's gesture. The Italian artist does not attempt to translate or own Paul Davies's protest—does not issue a public statement of support, does not create a work of art bearing his own signature, does not organize a benefit concert—but instead, in an act of symbolic self-erasure, allows the artist's language to speak through him. Not knowing what he is saying, he acts on good faith alone, and in doing so leaves himself vulnerable. This surrender of power might, perhaps, serve as a tentative first step toward establishing the trust on which solidarity depends.

1. "Orphée Noir" was published as the foreword to a 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* [Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry in French], ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor (Paris: PUF, 1997).
2. Aimé Césaire, cited in Souleymane Bachir Diagne's "Exile," in *documenta 14 Reader* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 405–25.
3. With the proviso that this reading of the photograph is an attempt to think through a problem rather than appraise the work or untangle the historical facts of the encounter.
4. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (London: Penguin, 2006)

Juliet Jacques, *To Be Free,* 2017, *Speak Through You* installation views at Hot Wheels Projects, Athens, 2018. Photo: Erasmia Kadinopoulou

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