

Little White Lies

Sadek, Farah. "Yemi Bamiro on the making of *Black Is Beautiful: The Kwame Brathwaite Story*," *Little White Lies*, October 31, 2025.



Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Kwame Brathwaite Self Portrait at AJASS Studios), 1964 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

The documentary filmmaker breathes life and love into this doc on the trailblazing photographer who helped to define the aesthetics of the "Black is Beautiful" movement.

It was the Brooklyn-born, Bronx-raised, and Harlem-championing photojournalist Kwame Brathwaite who came to popularise the phrase "Black is Beautiful," which grew into the cultural movement that would unapologetically embrace and celebrate Blackness, especially honouring the beauty of darker-skinned individuals. Originally born Gilbert Ronald Brathwaite, the photographer later chose to rename himself 'Kwame' in honour of Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana after its liberation from British colonial rule.

Men often don't get their flowers until their death, though this statement proves itself most true in the case of Black men, and in the case of the African-American photographer who would only enjoy the success of his work a few years before his death, it is true to an extent. The fact that Kwame would keep his collection of photographs mostly private for many years was not only a political statement; it was also a way for him to control how his work was shared and understood.

South-London based documentary filmmaker Yemi Bamiro has beautifully risen to the task of sharing Kwame's art with the world. His newest documentary, *Black Is Beautiful: The Kwame Brathwaite Story* had its world premiere at the 69th edition of the BFI London Film Festival, where we had the chance to discuss the making of his passion project. "The real challenge was how to fit a life that rich, those stories and eras, into a single, coherent film," Bamiro says.

Bamiro has always shown a fascination with community and grassroots in his work. He first found out about Kwame's work in 2021, when a friend of his bought him the titular archival book by Tanisha C. Ford. "One of the producers, Lizzie Gillette, messaged me in August 2023 and wanted to talk about the project," he explains. The ball quickly started rolling after a plane trip to visit his family in Pasadena, California provided him the opportunity to check out the archive.

"I always felt this sense of privilege," Bamiro says about getting to make this documentary. "It never felt like work: going to Harlem, meeting the family, living in the archive. It was so rewarding that I would've done it for little to no pay." Though Bamiro humbly refers to himself as the custodian of the story, history may remember him as an essential part of it.

Kwame took over half a million photos throughout his life, and the family has only gone through about 10 percent of his archive. "They're still discovering new material every day: handwritten poems to Bob Marley, unseen shots of Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder," Bamiro says, describing it as a true "treasure trove." But wading through the gigantic archive wasn't the most challenging part for making the film. Rather, it was the score. "There's a traditional way to score [this type of] documentary: lots of strings, sad music, but we wanted to do something different," he says. "Our two composers, Kwes and Marley Ren, worked together on a beautiful fusion that intermixed their respective traditional and modern styles."

Despite apprehension from audiences during test screenings, Bamiro advocated to use contemporary female artists like FKA Twigs on the soundtrack. "I came to the edit one day and [editor] Otto [Burnham] had included the song *Two Weeks* [by FKA Twigs] and I couldn't unhear it," he recalls. "When we did some test screenings, people weren't sure about it, because it's too contemporary. But we were like, 'Nah, man, it just works so well.'"

Bamiro wouldn't have been able to make a project like this if he didn't stand his ground. He didn't feel challenged working with a posthumous subject, thanks to the help of Kwame's children and wife. "I've always seen it as a love story between Kwame and his wife, Sikolo; the sacrifices she made so he could do his work, her selflessness, her role as his muse and the mother of his children," he says. "She was the foundation of everything; without her, none of it would have been possible."

The intrinsic female influence on the "Black is Beautiful" movement and on this film doesn't end there; Bamiro credits the pioneering Grandassa Models (the product of a push towards body positivity in New York by the African Jazz-Art Society & Studio) as co-creators of the movement. They embodied the concept of "Black is

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Kwame Brathwaite
Untitled (Model who embraced natural hairstyles at AJASS photoshoot), 1970 c.
Archival pigment print, mounted and framed

Beautiful" and wore their natural hair and their tribal African patterns loud and proud. "It was always about women," Bamiro says. "The models had agency over what was happening. They weren't just models, they were educators, mothers, and active in the community."

Although Kwame's work became a springboard for several contemporary Black artists including Rihanna and Jesse Williams, Bamiro did not treat it as the focal point of the photojournalist's legacy. "The familial aspect of the film and my being a father to two girls was the key to the whole thing," Bamiro explains. He speaks with reverence about family, reminiscent of how that sentiment oozes from Kwame and his work, which is why he made sure to include special moments with Kwame and his kids. He adds that "there's this amazing Super-8 footage of Kwame Jr. as a young boy in Central Park talking proudly about his dad, which I *had* to include, but because it wouldn't be in sync with the timeline, we just didn't include a time stamp."

In a moment of pure connection, I ask Bamiro about the concept of the original Black identity, and how Black individuals like Kwame have connected with their Blackhood in adulthood. "I think identity is something each person has to define for themselves. It's a journey of finding your own name, your own sense of belonging, and coming to that understanding through your own path," he says.

Bamiro was in foster care until he was eight, growing up in a small village in Guildford. "During that time, I'd see my biological family occasionally, but I was the only Black person in my community – the only one who looked like me." When he later moved back to London to live with his biological family in a predominantly Black community, he struggled a lot with questions about who he was. "On top of that, my parents were first-generation Nigerian immigrants, so there were layers of cultural identity to navigate as well." He continues, "I'd never been to Nigeria, and having grown up in Guildford, suddenly being in South London, surrounded by people who looked like me, but also carried a different sense of identity, was a real adjustment."

As someone who came into their own Black identity in adolescence, allowing myself to dress in vibrant colours was one of the biggest fears I had as a young Black girl. To my elders, it signaled exposure, promiscuity, and a total visual mismatch. So, when I first came across Kwame's photographs in Bamiro's documentary, specifically a portrait of a female Black model backdropped to a sea of turquoise – a colour that I had to learn to fall in love with contrasted on my skin – it healed something in me I didn't know needed healing.

It's no coincidence that that portrait was Yemi Bamiro's choice for the poster for his documentary about Kwame's legacy. It showcases a dark-skinned Black woman in all her glory, with a full Afro, during a time when Black women were taught to believe that their natural features were not beautiful – in a way, that spotlights Kwame's entire legacy.