

Archive review: the Black Cultural Archives, Brixton

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Archive review

The Black Cultural Archives, Brixton

The Black Cultural Archives (BCA) is London's highest-profile black history archive and heritage centre. Established in the early 1980s by a group of community activists, including educationalist Len Garrison, the BCA is committed to 'collecting, preserving and celebrating the histories of diverse people of African and Caribbean descent in Britain', and to promoting 'the teaching, learning and understanding of the African people's contribution, which will enable the public to learn and connect with hidden histories, creating an experience to uplift and inspire'.¹ They are based in a renovated Georgian building on Windrush Square, a site with sufficient symbolic capital to underwrite their ambition to become the leading national institution for black British history.

This institution is sorely needed. Despite a raft of important publications over the last few years, black British history remains often marginalised and separated off from broader accounts of historical change in modern Britain.² In this review, we

¹ Black Cultural Archives, 'About Us' <<http://bcaheritage.org.uk/about/>>.

² Important recent works include Robin Bunce and Paul Field, *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography* (London, 2014); Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, 2015); Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2015); Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England 1968–1993* (Basingstoke, 2016). Forthcoming are Anne-Marie Angelo, *Global Freedom Struggle: The Black Panthers of Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States* (Chapel Hill); Joshua Guild, *In the Shadows of the Metropolis: Cultural Politics and Black Communities in Postwar New York and London* (Oxford); and Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964–1985* (Berkeley).

suggest how the BCA offers historians a means of challenging this marginalisation and the institutional and pedagogical practices that often sustain it. Our review is split into three sections. First, we detail the origins of the archive and its connection to the developing politics of black British heritage. Next, we provide an overview of the BCA's collections and how they speak to current concerns in the research and writing of twentieth-century British history. Finally, we suggest how greater engagement between academics, researchers and teachers and the BCA can help address some of the continuing significant shortcomings in universities over racial and social justice in the curriculum and in access and recruitment. We propose that the BCA offers a unique opportunity for researchers and teachers wishing to broaden or their curriculums, their programmes for public engagement, and their efforts to bring a wider and more diverse community into the academy. Perhaps, even, it offers a means to meet the challenge of decolonising the university.

The origins of the archive

The Black Cultural Archives has its origins in the black education movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in which Len Garrison played a prominent part. Garrison had come to Britain in 1954, aged eleven, a child migrant from Jamaica joining his family. Grammar-school educated, he took a scholarly path, studying for postgraduate qualifications in the early 1970s at Ruskin College, Oxford, and the University of Sussex. Alongside this, he was active also in youth work, teaching classes in black history in Brixton in the 1960s.³ From an early age his interest was in making the study

³ Len Garrison interview in Zhana, *Black Success Stories: Celebrating People of African Heritage*

of contemporary black culture and history available to young adults whom he felt lacked the means to express their marginalisation in British society. In 1976 he founded the African-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER) Project. Funded by the Inner London Education Authority, and housed initially at their Centre for Urban Education Studies, ACER aimed ‘to collect and disseminate material drawn from the African and Afro-Caribbean sources related to the black child’s cultural background for use in the multi-cultural classroom’.⁴

In the early 1980s, Garrison’s work with ACER converged with the work of other activists seeking to preserve and make accessible resources for studying black British history. With the uprisings that rocked British inner cities in 1981, many black community activists in London renewed their focus on education as a means to overcome some of the issues faced by young people. Their determination was compounded by the visit of African American activist Queen Mother Moore, who came to Britain for a speaking tour in May 1982. A Civil Rights activist since the 1930s, Moore was a champion of education and heritage politics. She came to Britain to spread her vision for the building of a new monument that ‘would be a comprehensive international depository of African life and culture and a meeting place where we could develop the strategies and resources needed to continue the struggle for liberation’.⁵ After Moore’s departure, Makeda Coaston and Askala Miriam, the community activists responsible for facilitating her visit, came together with Garrison and others to create the African People’s Historical Monument Foundation (UK), with the Black Cultural

(London, 2005), 77.

⁴ Black Cultural Archives (BCA), London, GARRISON/2/1/4, ‘Afro-Caribbean Education Resource Project’, n.d.

⁵ *Westindian World*, 28 May 1982.

Archives as their first project.⁶

Education and commemoration projects in black heritage were rapidly expanding in the early 1980s as activists responded to the revived repatriation politics given a fillip in the aftermath of the urban uprisings, and to the frequent erasure of Britain's black history in the booming heritage industry.⁷ Alongside the BCA, projects in local black history were undertaken in Brent, Birmingham, Haringey, Liverpool and Southampton in the early 1980s, while Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee set about republishing Mary Seacole's memoir in 1981, and Peter Fryer began research for his celebrated history of black Britain also in that year.⁸ For Garrison, establishing a heritage centre in Brixton offered a permanent monument and reminder of the black presence and contribution to the history of Britain.⁹ His initial ambition was for a site between Somerleyton Road and Railton Road, the centres of black settlement in

⁶ BCA, uncatalogued, 'Documenting the Archives', volunteer training recording, 25 September 2009.

⁷ See Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994).

⁸ Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee, *Roots in Britain: Black and Asian Citizens from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II* (Brent, 1981); Kevin Myers and Ian Grosvenor, 'Birmingham Stories: Local Histories of Migration and Settlement and the Practice of History', *Midland History*, 36 (2011), 149–162, at 151 n10, 156 n43; R. Belgrave, 'Black People and Museums: the Caribbean Heritage Project in Southampton', in Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (eds), *The Politics of the Past* (London, 1994), 63–73; Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee (eds), *Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole in Many Lands* (Bristol, 1984); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984). See also Rob Waters, 'Thinking Black: Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* and the Politics of Writing Black British History in the 1980s', *History Workshop Journal*, 82 (2016), 104–120.

⁹ BCA, BCA/1/2/4 (1/2), 'Minutes from Meeting', 11 January 2000.

Brixton, and symbolically central in the life of the black community there. The archive found a home just to the north of Somerleyton Road in council-owned premises at 378 Coldharbour Lane. Intended as a temporary measure, they remained in this location for twenty-four years, before moving to premises in Othello Close in Kennington in 2005.

The BCA finally moved to its current location on Brixton's Windrush Square nine years later. While based at Othello Close, it had completed a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) project to document the collection professionally for the first time. The success of this project in uncovering what the BCA already had, as well as its work in creating new collections, led to a second successful bid, this time for a £4 million grant to shift premises to Raleigh Hall, the formerly derelict Grade II listed building on Windrush Square, which now houses the BCA's archive and cultural centre. The opening, on a sweltering day in July 2014, with thousands in attendance, marked the BCA's role as a leading archive and cultural centre for black British history and heritage, and its ambition to stand as a national institution in this field.

The archive holdings

The BCA's collection arose not only out of the milieu of educational activism but constitutes a form of heritage activism begun by Garrison, who built the archive out of books he found, the programmes of events he attended, newspaper clippings and finds in antiques shops. 'Anywhere I went', as he told an interviewer in the early 2000s, 'I used to cut out articles in newspapers, I would just collect them. But eventually I began to build up a collection by going to antiques shops, to Portobello Road and to second-hand shops'. Getting a name for himself among antique-dealing networks, Garrison would be passed anything, from the records of slave plantations to African sculpture;

indeed, he formed one of the largest existing collections of the music of Samuel Coleridge Taylor by ‘using the music I collected in these junk shops’.¹⁰ These early finds formed the basis of the BCA’s holdings, and are catalogued now in their ephemera collection. The ephemera collection remains one of the largest and most important collections within the archive, offering snapshots of cultural and political activity at community level particularly during the 1970s to the 1990s. The collection represents material that has had a life within the community, providing the basis for a nuanced social and cultural history of black London in this era. Garrison’s ambition to find material and artefacts that could counter the erasure of black Britons from dominant public memorialisations of the British past, moreover, was a radical act that remains at the core of the BCA’s mission and of the possibilities contained in its archive.

In the intervening years to the present, the BCA’s archive has grown substantially through donations of personal papers, often of people who worked closely with Garrison. As in London’s other major black history archival collections—at the George Padmore Institute in Finsbury Park, the Institute of Race Relations in King’s Cross, and in the London Metropolitan Archives’ Huntley Archives—radical politics is particularly well represented at the BCA, reflecting the archive’s foundation within radical networks. The BCA holds the papers of Alrick “Ricky” Cambridge, Stella Dadzie, Cecil Gutzmore, Jan McKenley, Suzanne Scafe, and Ansel Wong—community activists, educationalists, and leading figures in London’s Black Power organisations. It also holds a collection of the pamphlets and newsletters of the Black Liberation Front, the papers of several community organisations responding to the Brixton uprisings of 1981, and a collection of texts, photographs, newspaper articles, witness accounts, and

¹⁰ Garrison in Zhana, *Black Success Stories*, 82–85.

ephemera relating to these uprisings, and to the uprisings in Birmingham, Croxteth and Southall. The black radical groups represented in these archives played a significant part in the politics of race during the turbulent decades of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Their campaigns for social and racial justice in policing, the courts, education, employment, housing, health, and childcare repeatedly held the state to account, even as they often also worked with the state, in often uneasy alliances. This material held at the BCA, particularly on the 1980s, will undoubtedly see increasing use by researchers as historians begin to unpick the British politics of race, anti-racism and multiculturalism in the second-half of the twentieth century.

Alongside these community-activist archives, there is also a rich and growing oral history collection, largely arising from projects undertaken by the BCA to coincide with the public display of their archive holdings on contemporary black history. The recent *Staying Power* exhibition, bringing together the work of black British photographers active since the 1950s, undertaken in partnership with the Victoria and Albert Museum, was complemented with an extensive oral history project. Other key projects include oral histories with women involved in the black women's movement, and interviews with members of the 'Windrush' generation on the realities of life in Britain, including with Connie Mark who served in the Auxiliary Territorial Service during World War II, and after coming to Britain helped to establish the Mary Seacole Memorial Association. Complementing its acquisition of activist archives, the BCA has also recently acquired a series of interviews with former British Black Panther members.¹¹ These oral history and heritage projects stand beside archives of previous

¹¹ Photofusion Community, 'The British Black Panther Project'

<<http://www.photofusion.org/photofusion-community-the-british-black-panther-project/>>.

heritage projects held by the BCA, including the BCA's own papers, Len Garrison's papers, the papers of the Black and Asian Studies Association, and the papers of historian Jeffrey Green. They have also taken management of collections emerging from the Black Dance Archives project.¹²

A significant addition to the collections is the archive of the Runnymede Trust, the race equality think tank established in 1968 by anti-racist campaigners and researchers active with the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination and the Institute of Race Relations, and responsible in 2000 for the publication of the Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. The collection, catalogued and accessible for the period 1968–2000, includes extensive press cuttings, and an unrivalled collection of periodicals—over four hundred titles, covering national and regional anti-racist, race relations, minority ethnic, and arts journals and magazines. It also includes the research files from Runnymede projects over the period up to 2000, collections offering rich pickings for historians looking to understand the complex interactions of state, universities and the third sector in the rise of race relations and the politics of multiculturalism in the late twentieth century. Complementing this race relations material is the archive of sociologist Michael Banton, whose study of black communities in Stepney in the 1950s defined the field of early postwar race relations research. Banton's archive, which includes early research papers, organizational papers of those groups he encountered during his studies, and reports responding to the rapidly expanding field of race relations research of the 1950s and 1960s, provides a useful complement to the Runnymede's.

Historians of twentieth-century Britain are increasingly seeking to understand

¹² Black Dance Archives Project <<http://blackdancearchives.co.uk/>>.

the place of racial politics in the major transformations of state and society in this era, particularly in the postwar decades. Both alongside and as a part of this emerging scholarly shift, black British history is also, belatedly, both receiving the attention it deserves in its own right, and being integrated into, and used to complicate and disrupt, wider understandings of twentieth-century British life. The BCA's collections are indispensable to these projects. They traverse the major political events and movements—around policing and immigration, and urban civil unrest—and the sociological and governmental practices of what many of those black activists whose papers dominate this archive would call the 'race relations industry'. But alongside this, and offering important counterpoints for those who might follow their moments of connection, are invaluable collections on culture and the arts, and heritage and community education practices. Rising to the challenge of properly recognising the place and importance of the politics of race and black British historical experience to how we research and explain twentieth-century British history, however, will also require a careful and committed engagement with the BCA's wider community and education agendas, and it is to this that we now turn for the final section of this review.

The Black Cultural Archives and researching and teaching British history

In recent years there has been a growing demand for British universities to 'decolonise' their curriculums, and to organise university teaching and research in a way that reflects Britain's contested multicultural pasts and presents. The National Union of Students' *Race for Equality* report of 2010 found that forty-two per cent of students 'did not believe their curriculum reflected issues of diversity, equality and discrimination', while thirty-four per cent 'stated they felt unable to bring their perspective as a black

student to lectures and tutor meetings'.¹³ The report contributed to the founding of the 'Why is My Curriculum White?' movement at University College London in 2014, and campaigns for 'Why is My Curriculum White?' have since taken hold at London School of Economics, University of Warwick, University of Bristol, University of Birmingham, University of Manchester, University of East Anglia, and City University. Parallel to this, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, begun at the University of Cape Town in 2015 with a call to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the campus, and a demand to 'decolonise' education in South Africa, was taken up by students at the University of Oxford in late 2015, with the Oxford Union passing a resolution to remove Rhodes's statue from Oriel College in early 2016. This campaign has also been successful in questioning the ways in which the colonial past is remembered and taught at Oxford, as well as drawing attention to the ramifications of these questions today in terms of university recruitment, funding, and research. But while changes are appearing, these have been slow. The BCA provides a useful resource for meeting the challenges of forcing wider-reaching change in curricula, teaching, access and recruitment at Britain's universities.

Since re-opening on Windrush Square in 2014, the Black Cultural Archives have hosted a series of exhibitions challenging Eurocentric or white-washed readings of British history. Covering topics from black Georgians to the black women's movement in Britain, and with stunning recent installations on black British photography and Rastafari culture, these exhibitions have provided a much-needed counter to the current tendency in most of London's major museum and art spaces to

¹³ National Union of Students, 'Race For Equality: A Report on the Experiences of Black Students in Further and Higher Education' (2010)

<https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12350/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf>.

restrict such considerations to minor or temporary exhibitions. Adding to this higher profile for public histories of black Britain, recently the BCA was also one of the partners involved in the making of David Olusoga's BBC2 documentary *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, which combined a re-telling of British history through the black British presence with the installation of twenty heritage plaques across Britain, West Africa and the Caribbean.

For students these resources provide a useful entry point for studying black British history, and for thinking about the politics of race in how we study and write about British history. The rich array of archive items on display in the exhibitions will also allow students to think about the sources we might use in studying such histories, and encourage them to explore the BCA's holdings further. The archive is indeed open to the public, and undergraduate research there has increased significantly in the past two years, with undergraduates making up thirty-eight per cent of archive visitors in 2016—a statistic which bodes well for the future of our field.¹⁴

The Black Cultural Archives has also worked to bring about a wider public engagement in historical research and interpretation, bridging the gap that so often remains between academic, community and independent researchers and audiences. Its most recent exhibition, *Rastafari in Motion*, involved groups from the Rastafarian movement in curation and in the development of the public programme. Public events, held as informal 'groundings' in the café, brought together members of the public with representatives from these groups and academic researchers, while 'occupy the archives' workshops also invited visitors into the archives to handle material in

¹⁴ Figures provided by the Black Cultural Archives. Our thanks to Victoria Northridge and Munira

Mohamad for talking us through the collections and public engagement activities at the BCA.

dialogue with researchers and curators.¹⁵ Alongside such initiatives, the BCA offers a series of history courses, covering black seafaring and revolutionary politics, black soldiers in the First World War, and the long history of the African diaspora since the medieval period, while community archive heritage workshops offer introductions to using the archives for public exhibitions and learning projects. The latter has already led to a collaborative project between the BCA, Lwam Tesfay of the History Matters Young Historians Project, and Hakim Adi of Chichester University—Britain’s first black history professor. This project uses the BCA’s Black Liberation Front archive to train 14–25 year-olds in heritage skills, oral history, multimedia production, archival research, and curation, and to create a series of online learning resources in the history of black British activism. Again, in light of the continuing shortcomings of British universities in addressing black and minority ethnic under-representation in both the student and academic body, such initiatives offer a way forward which combines addressing issues of curriculum change with offering one means by which wider participation in higher education might be achieved.¹⁶

The BCA has also been actively involved in shaping teaching within the academy. Since 2014 they have provided higher education workshops looking at black Georgians, black Edwardians, the black women’s movement, the black education movement, the Rastafari movement, and urban uprisings, and they also offer bespoke workshops. These provide talks and archive-handling sessions for students, covering the range of materials held in the archive. The sessions have undoubtedly helped to fuel

¹⁵ See Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with my Brothers* (London, 1969).

¹⁶ On this under-representation, see Nathan E. Richards (dir.), *Absent from the Academy* (London, 2013).

the rise in undergraduate research in the archive, providing as they do a range of new and under-used collections which, as we indicated above, can speak to several significant ongoing debates in modern British history. Beyond undergraduate dissertations and research essays, though, the workshops have also laid the foundations for a wider-reaching change in university curricula, serving as the basis for follow-up conversations with several universities looking to develop black history programmes and modules, or to introduce black history into their existing teaching provision. As we note, these changes are not widespread, and a fuller engagement across higher education is undoubtedly needed. But for those readers wishing to push this engagement within their own institutions, the Black Cultural Archives is an invaluable resource.

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