

20 January, 2015 2nd Annual History Festival Day, Senate House, University of London Dr. E.M. Williams

‘ “New Kid on the Block”: the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) reflections on what it means for British History from here...’

When I started studying history I was entranced by the big events; the invasions, battles, wars, and the big characters; the adventurers, aristocrats, rebels and revolutionaries, imperialists. I was also fascinated by the everyday people and individuals that managed to subvert formidable forces often placed in their way. These stories and historical narratives that we are so familiar with are undergirded by excellent historical sources accessible and held in institutions up and down the country that preserve and maintain the material for researchers. They help us understand the trajectory of this nation state because of Britain’s unique imperial and colonial past. We have increasing clarity regarding the actions of the establishment and its adventuring workers who sought their fortunes abroad. Moreover we can tell foreign visitors more about their historical heritage than they may be aware. We hold more of their historical “data” in our centres of learning, private collections and LMAs¹ than they hold on us.

To find out about the subaltern you often have to return to the citadel of the foreign governing elite. One has to excavate and reconstruct the unfolding sequence of events and potential layers of veracity through the prism and paradigms established by the conqueror by utilizing their source material (documents).²

The introduction of the BCA into the firmament of our national landscape of LMAs adds a fresh dimension a well needed injection of insight, nuance, and perspective into the tapestry of our national life from different voices. The BCA showcases the presence and contribution of people of colour to the UK that arguably in some cases due to the quirks of colonialism, considered themselves more British than those that never left this sceptred Isle. Although they did retain influences from the rich multi-ethnic heritage of the Caribbean and further back. A plethora of source materials generated from and informed by the perspective of these communities has been largely absent from the network of our established LMAs. We get glimpses in archives or just absence and the resulting silence reinforces a myopic narrative of non-presence and non-contribution. Of course this picture has steadily been improving with the work of Fryer, Shyllon, in the beginning and Adi, Killingray, Sherwood, Habib (Imtiaz) Chater, Kaufman and others more recently. But talk to any of these researchers of their “journeys” through the archive and you’ll understand the phrase of swimming upstream with one hand tied behind your back plus blind-folded!

The presence of the BCA I would argue will start to chip away at the psychological blockers that exists for us as a society that still struggles with issues of representation throughout the

¹ Libraries, Museums, Archives.

² National Archives Kew-Caribbean through the Lens-whose gaze? Who selects the subject?

fabric of our public life. Our historical imagination is still uniformed and our curiosity requires further development and nourishment. What strikes me is that despite the numerous historical encounters and cohabitation between Black and White in this county from the Roman invasion and into the period of empire, colonialism, independence, continued neo-imperialism, migration and immigration we still really don't know much of each other's inter-connective trajectories both visible and invisible. The existence of the BCA and others which it joins presents a solid institutional framework of content that enables researchers, students and the public to explore the many layers of interconnection that make us who we are as a society. It is dedicated to address the "gaps" in the national conversation about our past, present and portend for our future.

Chimamada Ngozi Adichie's seminal essay "The Danger of a Single Story," is worth referencing from here. As researchers we pride ourselves on drawing from a plethora of sources as we examine the who, what and whys of how our society functions and the actions of its protagonists. How representative can stories be when one revisits the same old territory from the same old angle without thought, effort or reference to fresh sources when relevant? I make a plea for fearlessness in research despite the overwhelming familiar subject areas beloved of our publishers, TV broadcasters, UG course coordinators, and school curriculum. "Same old, same old" as the saying goes. All the time reinforcing the well-rehearsed shibboleths of an establishment led construction of who we 'think' we are and who is sidelined or conveniently forgotten.

What of the other stories and the sources which contest what and who we think we know?

The BCA alongside its longstanding peers provides an opportunity for the rediscovery of narratives that have been unknown, long forgotten or ignored. It provides us with the tools to do the ground work. Furthermore I would argue the appetite is there not just for the regurgitation of a single story. Attempts to revisit and add new layers have steadily been on the rise even through the popular celebrity driven format of "Who Do You Think You Are." The celebrities chosen are diverse in class, ethnicity, socio-cultural backgrounds and through their "journey" present family histories which contest to some extent the cultural-history you learn in school. Dramatisations such as 'Small Island' based on Andrea Levy's book introduced the viewing public to the presence of West-Indians in Britain before the arrival of the Windrush (1948) focusing as it does on the 2WW years, Griff Rhys Jones' recent 'Burma, my Father and the Forgotten Army' introduced the audience to the fact that the grandparents of their Nigerian and Ghanaian neighbours may have fought patriotically for the British empire in one of the most brutal war arenas-Burma. Admittedly, this documentary was still refracted through a celebrity and through his Father's-a white man's story. Presentation on British terrestrial TV is everything to do with editorial decision-making of a privileged clique of what they consider the viewing public wants to see and can identify with and which neatly reinforces (and I would argue, questionable) assumptions of

mainstream (however one wishes to define such an entity) culture. I would argue many licence-fee payers are tired of the “single” type “history influenced” stories and viewing diet of the Tudors, Vikings, Call the Midwife and the like (many vote with their feet and move to SKY, the internet elsewhere). As well as repeated pathological portraits of BME citizens engaged in crime, urban disturbance and lately terrorist activities (in dramas and purportedly serious investigative programmes). I am not arguing that these stories are not valid just that room should be made for alternative and differing voices and a range within the alternative- to be given a platform.

Adiche argues when creating a single story the tendency is to show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become in the popular imagination and probably in their own minds too! We have to examine notions of power and agency. In our politicised society the version of the story is shaped and defined by power dynamics. How and when they are told, by whom, what sources are used to substantiate, are often dependent on competing agendas to get the “right” message across. Adiche again: “[power] is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it the *definitive* story of that/those person/people.” The existence of “gatekeepers” cannot be ignored as well as their access and monopoly in the control of funding, and influential networks. Power comes with this.

The BCA’s existence means our conception and understanding of the communities, organisations and themes it showcases out of its unique and expanding material, need no longer be impoverished. It is a living and growing archive and exhibition space and the programme for the year has much to offer and inform the researcher. We now have a resource solely dedicated to cultivating a deeper understanding of a range of experiences of people of colour and their engagement with fellow citizens through the centuries who they live alongside, work with, marry and partner with. It stands fully as a part of the heritage sector representing British history. Dr Kimberly Keith (*BCA trustee and curator of its current exhibition ‘Staying Power: photographs of Black British Experience 1950s-1990s,’ with accompanying objects and auditory commentary and text rich in British social and cultural political history of this period*) argues “[the BCA] reflects upon our history by allowing an engagement with the objective and subjective contents. It helps us navigate through our contemporary experiences in our arguably post-racial society.”

With the emergence of the BCA, we can have access to sources that will enable researchers to present potentially more nuanced and balanced layers into the current single narrative of British post-war socio-economic migration history. Adiche reminds us that, the single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are *incomplete*. They make one story become the only story and as a consequence it robs individuals of their dignity and agency to self-define (their voice). It also makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. Stereotypes have a tendency to emphasise our

differences and de-emphasise our similarities. We need a balance of voices and perspectives-all voices matter which I think as researchers and creators of knowledge we all appreciate. The existence of the BCA and its contents provides us with further tools that can be used to inform, empower and add agency as well as humanize in this increasing climate of suspicion and fear.

Postscript:

The BCA introduces researchers to unique series of

Historical journals and newspapers, ephemera, publications by social activist groups, oral testimonies, publications from the 18thc, social action campaign materials, the Black Women's Feminist Movement, the Black arts movement, materials of protest and progressive campaigns, papers of campaigners, historical figures of the 19thc, social activists, colonial families, politicians etc