

FREEDOM ROADS EXHIBITION BIOGRAPHIES

Introduction

The exhibition 'Freedom Roads' features contemporary photographic portraits of people of African origin whose work contributes to the continuing struggle for human rights in many different fields. At the end of the year in which the bi-centenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was commemorated this exhibition engages with current issues and looks forward to new challenges.

Toyin Agbetu

Founder of the Ligali Organisation in 2001. Ligali is a Pan African, human rights movement. A core focus of their work is the empowerment of African people through the promotion of African culture and identity whilst simultaneously challenging the misrepresentation of Africa and her children in the British media.

"I find it difficult to choose a single, physical item which symbolises freedom to me as those I feel most are deeply spiritual and intangible. Perhaps one item would be my talking drum - to me it represents an authentic African voice... a voice that is traditional, both deep and powerful and somehow capable of invoking messages of freedom across spiritual and physical planes whilst ignoring both time and space.

My brown African shirt together with the paper invite to the Westminster abolition ceremony are two other such objects. Whilst the small invite is physically an expression of colonial misdeed, Maafa denial and continued oppression, together with the African shirt which for me represents pride and dignity - they have both now become a powerful symbol of Truth. More importantly they helped express a message of hope and remind myself and millions of others since that day that true freedom does not come from the removal of physical chains. True freedom comes when we liberate ourselves from the prisons buried deep within us and dare to release our spirit in order to reach out and touch the souls of our Ancestors."

Black Experience Archive Trust (BEAT)

West Green BEAT involved 40 young Caribbean and African pupils who explored their family histories as well as black heroes in history. Black people have contributed immeasurably to Britain's national heritage. They have helped to transform industry and have been at the forefront of struggles in the workplace. They have also been responsible for maintaining and developing local communities in health care, social services and many other areas. Black struggles for justice have helped to transform the judicial system to the benefit of the whole of society. The aim of BEAT is to record interviews with people who have been involved in all these areas at a local level. BEAT offers a home to this experience, in the form of a digital data bank, and ensures that future generations will be able to reflect and review their history.

The pupils on this programme documented the testimonies and experiences of Black people who migrated to the U.K during the 20th century. The West Green BEAT archive was deposited at the London Metropolitan Archive.

Carmen: "You ask me what freedom means to me, I tell you freedom to me is being able to do what you want, when you want. Freedom to me is everyone being one and getting everything off their back! Freedom to me is just being free!!"

Stephanie: "Freedom is being who you want to be, doing things by your self."

Annika: "Freedom to me means being able to follow your dreams."

Bintu: To me freedom means to be able to speak and play with my little brothers and watch TV."

Seth: "To me it is to be able to do your own thing without anyone having to ruin that."

Le'Jeourne: "Freedom to me is to stop the crimes (guns, knives) because there are people out there losing their life for nothing."

Keiran: "To be set out into the world."

Jordan: "Freedom means being able to do things and you have the choice to do things and you are not forced to do things or locked up in prison."

El Crisis

El Crisis made his entry to the spoken word scene back in the year 2000. His lyrical style of poetry and performance is truly unique. He combines a hypnotic mixture of rap, spoken word power and chant. His reality does not end in the spiritual, Crisis raps, sings, chants and recites poetry, relating his experiences, stories, philosophies and viewpoints of the world and society today. He has performed extensively across the UK, and toured internationally including, New York, Philadelphia, Amsterdam, Gambia, Norway and Poland.

The highest side of one's soul is love and the purest expression of that love is freedom. Freedom is felt through the song that is sung through the soul; a soul that connects and relates timeless epic masterpieces from future, present and ancient times, for freedom knows no time. Freedom is a desire for those that don't have it, but is often abused by those that do.

Freedom is not a place, a people or an object, but freedom can be felt among people, places and things. What matters most is the consciousness that comes with being Free. The balance between one's wellbeing, health and future will always be met by the individuals need to have time, finance and resources, so there is no freedom without sacrifice and this balance is all part of the joy, pain, and harmony of what it is to be Free.

Freedom is what this system tries so hard take away
Freedom is what the fighters of the system want to stay
Freedom is what the ID Card will blatantly deny
Freedom is the excuse on which world leaders pitch there lies
Freedom would have no voice if we were forced to keep it down
Freedom will have no word, have no power, and have no sound
Freedom is in the expression of what the poet wants to say
Freedom is what the leaders of this world will take away.

Jessica & Eric Huntley

Jessica & Eric Huntley are founder members of Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications (BLP), which was created in 1968. *The Groundings With My Brothers* by Walter Rodney was the first book published by the company. In addition to many ground breaking titles BLP also produced posters and greeting cards celebrating black images. They opened The Bogle-L'Ouverture Bookshop in 1974, and created a venue that became a focal point for the community, hosting poetry readings, book launches, lectures, as well as co-sponsoring the International Fair of Radical Black & Third World Book Fairs. Participants for these events were drawn from the local and international community. In 1978 Friends of Bogle was created to help organise education seminars, the poetry & prose readings, concerts and cultural events.

The Huntley Collection is one of the most significant to have been deposited at London

Metropolitan Archives (LMA) in recent years.

“It is ironic that both Jessica and I were forced to leave our home in British Guiana after the British Government abrogated the country’s constitution in 1953. We were denied the freedom to meet, to write and to publish. We were only able to exercise those very freedoms denied us at home on taking up residence in England.”

Cyril Husbands

Cyril Husbands is a storyteller, songwriter, poet and performance artist. His work – which he describes as themed on relationships of all kinds, including economic, familial, intimate, political and social – is inspired by his pan-Africanism and radical humanist values.

“I chose my map of the motherland because it says so much. It is beautiful, varied and truthful, representing the rich diversity of the Africans at home and throughout the Diaspora and the continent itself. In showing the different nation states, it partly reflects Africa’s hundreds of peoples and thousands of cultures. This is important because we are told – and tell ourselves – so many untruths about our history and ourselves, such as the myths of the Windrush (preceded not only by many RAF planes, but by another ship, the Almanzora in 1947, the year before Windrush. Not to mention centuries of African migration to Britain) and that of 1807, the year Britain ended the ‘legal’ transatlantic trafficking of Africans, which did nothing to end the institution of British slavery itself. I’m on a mission to bear witness to these truths and reclaim our history from those who lie or deny our historic and contemporary realities, thus allowing racism’s roots to be fed and sustain its malign power over people of African descent. This map lives at the centre of my home, just as my pan-Africanist values are at the centre of my being.”

Kimani Nehusi

Gained a PhD in Caribbean History at UCL and a Diploma in Egyptology at the University of London. He has lectured in many communities around the world, North and South America, Africa, Guyana, Europe and the Caribbean. Dr. Nehusi currently lectures at the University of East London. He has been a member of the Huntley Advisory Group at LMA since its inception in 2005 and is the founder and director of the Afrika Studies Center at the University of East London.

“Freedom is the capacity to always do the right thing in the right way. The material wealth housed in places like the Tower of London includes some of the loot from enslavement, colonialism and other crimes against humanity. But it is the non material damage of these inhuman processes that has impacted most on Afrikans inside and outside of the continent of my sacred Ancestors and continues to do so to this day.

That is why SANKOFA is so important to me. SANKOFA is the ability and willingness to return to one’s past and retrieve relevant experiences, examples and lessons that are valuable in meeting challenges of the present in order to move securely and confidently into a better future. It is only by returning to knowledge and awareness of my real history and culture that I can understand the most fundamental questions of who I am, where I come from, what my real interests are and what is my mission in life. SANKOFA is the only way of healing myself of the effects of the amputated history, assassinated self-concept and diminished and confused identity that enslavement and colonialism enforced upon me. SANKOFA is the way for Afrikans, wherever they are born and whatever citizenship they claim, to know themselves, develop themselves to their fullest capacities and always do the right thing in the right way to secure and advance their own interests.

Nelson Mandela

The statue of Nelson Mandela was unveiled in Parliament Square in London on 29th August 2007. Mandela said the statue represented all people who have resisted oppression. "The history of the struggle in South Africa is rich with the stories of heroes and heroines, some of them leaders, some of them followers. All of them deserve to be remembered." Mandela has been given the freedom of nine cities. He says that The Centre of Memory and Dialogue, should dedicate itself to the recovery of stories suppressed by power.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in Transkei, South Africa. He joined the African National Congress in 1944 and was engaged in resistance against the ruling National Party's apartheid policies. On June 12, 1964 Mandela, was sentenced to life imprisonment. From 1964 to 1982, he was incarcerated at Robben Island Prison, off Cape Town. He spent 27 years in prison and was released on February 11, 1990. In 1991 Mandela was elected President of the ANC. He became president of South Africa in 1994.

He consistently refused to compromise his political position to obtain his freedom and became a symbol of freedom and equality. In South Africa he is often known as Madiba, an honorary title adopted by elders of his clan. The title has come to be synonymous with Nelson Mandela. He has received more than one hundred awards in the past four decades including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and the Freedom of the City of London.

"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Colin Prescod

A sociologist and political economist, Colin joined the BBC in 1989, where he became Head of the African/Caribbean Programmes Unit (1991/1992). He has worked mainly in film, TV and theatre. He is currently Chair of the Institute of Race Relations, London, and of the Association for Cultural Advancement through Visual Art (ACAVA), London, also a member of the editorial working committee of the international journal, Race and Class.

Much depends on whose mirror you're checking your reflection in.

If we're talking about or to Africans, specifically the ex-colonised continentals and the ex-enslaved diasporans - the idea of 'freedom' is conflated with historically fixed realities of de-colonization and emancipation. Here 'freedom' is part and parcel of narratives of escape from imposed historical episodes or social predicaments – freedom from.

If we are talking, more broadly, about the human spirit - 'freedom' is an 'imaginary' - maybe better expressed as 'liberation' to imagine new possibilities in history - freedom to.

Neither of these 'freedoms' should be confused with mere indulgences of personal 'freeness' to do what you like free of any social constraint or social responsibility.

Colin Prescod, November, 2007.

Shirley J. Thompson

The award-winning London composer Shirley J. Thompson is often hailed as one of the most original and gifted composers to emerge in contemporary Britain having composed numerous scores for opera, orchestra, contemporary dance, TV and Film. She **sees no boundaries in musical styles** and fuses contemporary orchestral classical with commercially Popular and World Music styles, exhibiting supreme craftsmanship. Her largest

orchestral work, '**New Nation Rising, A 21st Century Symphony**' (2004) has been recorded by the **Royal Philharmonic Orchestra** and is a ground-breaking work, that employs the RPO with two choirs, solo singers, a rapper and dhol drummers in an epic musical story celebrating London's thousand-year history. She is the first woman in Europe to have composed and conducted a symphony in the last 30 years. Shirley Thompson has co-scored the multi-award-winning **Sadler's Wells** contemporary ballet production, **PUSH**, starring **Sylvie Guillem** and **Russell Maliphant** is currently touring the major dance/concert venues of Europe, North America and the Far East with performances at the **London Coliseum** in April 2008. **Spirit of the Middle Passage** for Solo Singers, Speaker and Orchestra, will premiere in November 2007 with the **Philharmonia** Orchestra at the QEH.

"I was free to conduct my new work, 'New Nation Rising: A 21st Century Symphony' with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. My ancestors did not enjoy such privileges."

Rudolph Walker

Rudolph Walker's acting career was inspired by the likes of Derek Walcott, Paul Robeson and Sydney Poitier. His big break came in 1972 with his lead role in the comedy series '**Love Thy Neighbour.**' The series was highly controversial and had a huge impact on the British public. It was the first time a black actor had been given such a role in a mainstream, prime-time television show. He was voted '**TV Personality Of The Year**'. **Since then he has had many roles in TV and theatre productions. These include,** The Thin Blue Line, Ali G Indahouse, the 1969 serial, The War Games in Doctor Who, Othello, The Tempest, and Pericles, Prince of Tyre to name just a few. Since 2001 he has played Patrick Truman in EastEnders.

In 2000, Rudolph's name was included in the prestigious list of the '**100 greatest and most influential Black people in British history**' for the millennium history archives. He was awarded the OBE in 2006.

He is patron of the following organisations:-

The Theatre Royal Stratford,

The Little Haven Children's Hospice - Supporting terminally ill children and their families,

Eastside Young Leaders Academy - Supporting young displaced or excluded black British school boys.

Birmingham Centre for Art Therapies - Improving quality of life through various art therapies.

SENIORS (Lewisham) - Resource centre for the over 50's in London.

Yaa Asantevvw Arts Centre - Carnival Arts and Business Development.

"Back in the sixties I appeared in Wole Soyinka's play, 'The Road', at the Theatre Royal in Stratford. I was doing an African play as a Caribbean man. It gave me a door into African culture. As a youngster I had been fed false stories as to what Africa was and it was a great liberation for me to be involved in this play. Since then the South East has held a special meaning for me so when I did the play, "The King of England" I had to do it in the South East. No other theatre would do.

Apart from my personal appearances, at this theatre, seeing the emergence of young talent coming out of the South East has been an inspiration for me. It is not a coincidence that I am patron of the East Side Young Leaders Academy. I have worked for two and a half years with a group of African-Caribbean young people who have had serious problems in their life. The age range is 8 – 17 years old. The group, bar none, have been able to mould themselves into role models for other young people. Some have gone on to schools such as Rugby and Eton. They are all part of this area. The thing that I've instilled in them is

education, of course, but also to maintain their dignity. Liberation is inside them. Freedom to express who they are and the freedom to achieve, everything is in their hands. They are part of this area and East London is all part of the Theatre Royal.