

**Race, Culture and Equality Working Group Report  
Royal Geographical Society  
Author: Natalie Hyacinth  
July 2019**

**Black Archives in the UK  
Report:  
Opportunities, Challenges and  
Moving Forward**

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## **Black Archives in the UK Report: Opportunities, Challenges and Moving Forward**

### **Introduction**

The intention of this report is to provide an indicative mapping of Black focused archives in the UK. It attempts to provide snapshots of the diverse Black archives existing across the UK, as well as the opportunities and challenges Black archives currently experience in the UK. Through this mapping, the report seeks to provide an evaluation of the breadth of resources available to de-colonial, anti-racist and Black Minority Ethnic scholarship in the UK. Thus, the report intends to provide an overview of the UK's Black archives, so as to strengthen the understanding of resources available, and how we may support and improve upon them.

Despite geographically opening with London, the report places equal importance and stature on regional, small, independent and more informal archives across the UK. Hence, the report has sought to cover areas of the UK that are often underrepresented in British Black Studies, such as Wales, Scotland and Ireland. This also reflects the larger concern of Black Studies maintaining a London-centric viewpoint, though the capital city is of course an important place for Black British history. Thus, the Black Cultural Archives, based in London, though greatly important, forms for the report but one of the many nodes in the networks and activities of Black archival work in the UK.

### **Objectives**

There are two main objectives of the report. The first, as noted above, is to provide snapshots of the range of Black archives in the UK. It is not meant to be a comprehensive review. The snapshots will include exploring each archive's history and contemporary presence, as well as the opportunities and challenges each archive experiences.

The second objective of this report is to stimulate a broader and deeper research agenda into Black archives. This report has been produced from a research project commissioned by the Race, Culture and Equality Working Group of the Royal Geographical Society. Thus, the report hopes to be a catalyst for further research into these topics and to engender much needed discussion about the future of Black archives in the UK.

## **Methodology**

As noted above, this report has been generated by a research project undertaken by the author for the Race and Equality Group for the Royal Geographical Society. The research was comprised of two main methods; theoretical research, including a literature review, and collecting empirical data. The first research method was a theoretical scoping of literatures on archives, specifically Black archives. Literature on specifically Black archives is a small but growing field, which was drawn upon for the report. Black archives were researched online, as well as looking through books and magazines.

Importance was placed upon gathering empirical data in the form of qualitative interviews. It was felt that hearing direct voices of individuals involved in archival work would be crucial to forming a well-rounded research project and report. Six qualitative interviews were conducted with leaders of Black archives from across the UK. The objectives of the interviews were to uncover each leader's local and specific perspective and experiences on the nature of archival work and to ascertain the challenges and opportunities each archive encountered. Several other individuals involved with archives also contributed via sending written contributions, referenced throughout the report. Contacts within the UK archival network were made by placing a message on the Black British Studies email list, highlighting the research as an open piece of work that valued contributions from any individuals or groups working with the Black archive sector.

The two main research methods of the report converged to form the main section of the report below. Starting with the Black Cultural Archives in London, this section of the report highlights and explores various Black-focussed archives across the UK.

## Black Cultural Archives, London



Photo of the Black Cultural Archives

Photo Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/13/london-black-cultural-archives-gets-thousands-stop-gap-funding-for-survival-heritage>

Black Cultural Archives (BCA) was established in 1981 by a group of community activists whose origins can be traced to the Black education movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Ishamel & Waters 2017). Lenford (Kwesi) Garrison (1943-2003), commonly known as Len Garrison, played a key role in these educationalist movements and was a prominent figure in the formation of the BCA. Garrison, born in St Thomas, Jamaica, migrated to Britain in 1954, joining his parents who had arrived a few years earlier in West London ([www.migrationmuseum.org](http://www.migrationmuseum.org)). After a scholarly path, with time spent as a student at both the University of Oxford and Sussex respectively, Garrison founded the African-Caribbean Education Resource (ACER) Project in 1976 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” (from BCA, quoted in Ishmael & Waters 2017:466).

The uprisings that shook British inner cities in the early 1980s would engender renewed thinking for Black educationalists towards how education could help and support inner city youth (Ishmael & Waters 2017). Queen Mother Moore, an African American activist who visited the UK for a speaking tour in 1982, helped to further inspire and consolidate the community work of Black activists like Garrison. During her visit,

Moore promulgated her vision of a new monument for Black British people 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” (from *Westindian World*, quoted in Ishmael & Waters 2017:466-67). Moore’s visit instigated the setting up of the African People’s Historical Monument Foundation (UK) by Garrison, Makeda Coaston and Askala Miriam, as well as other community activists, with the BCA as their first project (Ishmael & Waters 2017:466).



Queen Mother Moore alongside Len Garrison, Dawn Hill, current Chair of The BCA, Yana Morris and Vincent Thompson in the 1980s

Photo Source: <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/man-who-quietly-handled-business>

In 1997, amongst other ongoing projects, the BCA joined with Middlesex University to create the Archive and Museum of Black History, with Garrison now well known for the studied collection of Black-related materials, turning “up everywhere, taking photographs, making notes and collecting documents” (Phillips 2003). Thus, for Garrison and others, “establishing a heritage centre in Brixton offered a permanent monument and reminder of the Black presence and contribution to the history of Britain” (Ishmael & Waters 2017:466).



Activist Len Garrison (second from right) and other campaigners calling for a BCA

Photo Source: <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/man-who-quietly-handled-business>

Before its current location on Windrush Square, BCA existed in a number of sites. The archive's first home was 378 Coldharbour Lane, Brixton, in council owned premises, staying for 24 years (Ishmael and Waters, 2017). In 2005 the archives moved to Othello Close in Kennington, during which time the BCA received a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to professionally document the collection. The success of this project led to a £4 million grant to move to premises to Brixton (Ishmael and Waters, 2017). The building was Raleigh Hall, a derelict Grade II listed Georgian building in central Brixton.

The official opening of the BCA on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2014 was a momentous, celebratory occasion attended by over 3,000 people. The building became part of a £7-million restoration project to restore and renovate "aspects of the building's original historic features, in addition to a newly designed annexe to create a purpose-built archive and heritage centre accessible to the public" (blackculturalarchives.org). The building also won various

architectural awards, including the New London Architecture awards for 'London's next new building' ([www.newlondonarchitecture.org](http://www.newlondonarchitecture.org)).

The BCA, collecting archives since 1981, holds a large collection of archival materials, spanning a period of three centuries to the present day ([blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org)). BCA continues to collect "archives and material relating to the experiences of Black people in the UK, with a particular focus on the late 20<sup>th</sup> century" ([blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org)). The archives comprise a wide variety of material that includes "archives, library material and objects reflecting the history of the African diaspora and the people presence of African descent in Britain" ([blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org)). The BCA also has a library that contains approximately 6,000 books and independently published literature and was recently given the Runnymede Trust archive, "one of the most important libraries on race relations in the country" ([blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org)).

The BCA also has a large ephemera collection, providing glimpses of black community activism and politics, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. This 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" (Ishmael & Waters 2017:468). BCA has a reading room and a library, along with the archives themselves that are open and accessible to the public by appointment.

BCA's stated mission is to:

"promote the teaching, learning and understanding of the African people's contribution, which enables the public to learn and connect with hidden histories, creating an experience to uplift and inspire. This is achieved through our exhibitions, public programmes and events. Our growing collection of original archives constitute a permanent record of the richness of the Black experience in Britain and is accessible to all". ([blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org))

Although Garrison was sadly not alive to see the BCA's 2014 opening, he and other activists who worked towards establishing BCA would undoubtedly be proud to see their efforts come to fruition. However, though Garrison's vision has been achieved, recent reports regarding BCA's funding issues reveal the precarity the BCA endures, despite its standing as a national institution. The report now will therefore turn towards contemporary developments of the BCA.

### *Contemporary Developments*

BCA hosts a current and timely exhibition called “Windrush: Looking Back, Moving Forward” that explores the “concept of belonging and raises questions about Britishness, citizenship and identity” (blackculturalarchives.org). Over the last few years, the BCA have hosted flagship exhibitions including Black Sound (2017-2018), Rastafari in Motion (2016), Black Georgians: The Shock of the Familiar (2016) and Staying Power: Photographs of Black British Experience, 1950s-1990s. The BCA are developing their corporate partnerships via their exhibitions, for example partnering with JP Morgan for a three-part series of exhibitions, beginning with Radiating Greatness that was shown in early 2018.

Hosting inclusive and interactive exhibitions is part of BCA’s strategy to open up the space to the wider community, as well as to counter the prevalence of Black-related works and exhibitions being placed in minor or temporary displays in large, national institutional spaces (Ishmael & Waters 2017). The BCA works with national institutions in an effort to close this gap, such as partnering with the Victoria and Albert Museum on the Staying Power exhibition (Ishmael and Waters, 2017). The BCA also works with local communities in an ongoing effort to expand their reach into the local community, an attempt to foster a sense of inclusivity and openness alongside their standing as a national institution. The Rastafari in Motion exhibition in 2016 worked with the Rastafari community, holding community ‘groundings’ in the BCA café (Ishmael and Waters, 2017).

The BCA also played a key role in the Windrush 70 celebrations in 2018, hosting a series of events, and workshops. As part of these commemorations, an event called “Windrush, 70 Years On” was held at the BCA on Windrush Day, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2018. As well as Windrush 70 commemorations, BCA was also closely involved in the political unfolding of the Windrush immigration situation, releasing a statement entitled, “In Solidarity with the Windrush Generation”, stating that:

This is not an immigration story, not a moment of migrant history, but is central to British history. The history of Black people in Britain dates back centuries, yet this history has been long hidden. It is our duty to unearth and share these histories with everyone for a better and deeper appreciation of Britain. This will ensure injustices borne of ignorance and lack of empathy do not continue to occur and debate the value we give to this society” (blackculturalarchives.org)

The BCA held legal clinics for individuals affected by the Windrush situation and became a key site for Windrush demonstrations in 2018.



Diane Abbott, middle, leading a demonstration outside the BCA for Windrush immigration victims

Photo Source:

<https://twitter.com/hackneyabbott/status/987401200407629824>

The above outline of BCA's recent activities demonstrates BCA's engagement with important current and topical issues affecting Black communities, as well as a willingness to host events that speak directly to these issues and causes. However, despite BCA's important role as a national institution in highlighting Black issues and concerns, in late 2018 reports emerged that the BCA was facing a significant funding shortfall, owing to a lack of secure long-term funding. Various national media outlets reported on this news such as the Guardian and the Evening Standard, but the news particularly held sustained attention and consideration for Black media outlets. For example, in November 2018, the Voice Newspaper published an article called "Black Cultural Archives Issue Plea To The Community" in which it was reported that the BCA had lost two thirds of its revenue funding after four years of Heritage Lottery funding came to an end (voice-online.co.uk). The article reports that Dawn Hill OBE, chair of the BCA's board of trustees told The Voice:

"The issue is that the BCA is a national organisation and we are not getting any of the funding that other national organisations are getting. Ministers from the Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport have been to the BCA, they've seen what we do, have

spoken highly about what we do and then nothing happens. We need the community behind us. The BCA is for the black community and highlights the contributions that people of African and Caribbean heritage have made to this country. But it is also for everybody because we are part of British history. People need to understand we're not here by accident. There are many people in our community who appreciate what we are doing. So, we're asking people to help fundraise and support us. They can come into BCA and make a donation, support our café, reading room and exhibition, join as a Friend. They can go online and check the details on our website. We'd also like black churches to take note and join our campaign."

Hill's admonition brings to the fore questions of how a national institution of such cultural importance could face such substantial financial precarity and potentially the threat of closure, as well as the question of the community being faced with having to bear responsibility for such precarity. In light of these critical and crucial questions, calls of support were strong and wide for the continuation of the BCA.

In October 2018, Labour MP Chuka Umunna drew attention to the BCA's difficulties during Prime Minister's questions, noting that other national institutions such as the British Museum and the National Gallery receive 40% of their funding from the government. Umunna probed:

"Can I ask the prime minister to explain the differential treatment of the BCA and, in this Windrush year of all years, to right this wrong and provide it with the funding it desperately needs."  
(theguardian.com)

Calls of support were also taken up by the academic community. The Royal Geographical Society's Race, Culture and Equality Working Group, who commissioned this report, published a letter in support of the BCA, stating that the group were:

"deeply concerned by the potential closure of the BCA as a result of a reduction in funding and urge the government to provide sustainable long-term funding for the valuable collection and community space, which is a crucial resource of national and international importance" (raceingeography.org).

In December 2018, it was announced by the UK government that a cash injection of £200,000 from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport would secure the BCA's immediate future (londonnewsonline.co.uk).

However, ongoing precarity overshadows the BCA, which still lacks long-term, core funding that other national institutions are granted. Hannah Ishmael, an Archivist at BCA offered her thoughts on the issues surrounding these concerns, for this report. Ishmael pointed to structural inequality as one of the reasons for the BCA's funding issues. She noted that there was a "strong reticence that what we are doing is of value...it took twenty years of campaigning from the community to set up the BCA". When asked how she would characterise the present moment with regards to the BCA, Ishmael responded: "Precarious. We are still facing funding problems". Hannah also noted that the rise of the right and the Brexit vote had made racism in the UK more visible, putting into question "the rights you think you've won". Despite these questions, the BCA has ambitious plans for the future, including securing long-term core funding, discussed next.

### *Moving Forward*

In February 2019 it was announced that Arike Oke had been appointed Managing Director of the BCA, taking over the role from Paul Reid, who had occupied the position since the BCA's opening in 2014. BCA announced that part of Arike's role was to lead the "strategic development of BCA, delivering against a Business Plan and fundraising strategy for the long-term sustainability for the organisation" ([blackculturalarchives.org](http://blackculturalarchives.org))

Hannah similarly discussed BCA's strategies and plans for its future security, expansion and reach. One of BCA's strategies is to strengthen its long-standing link with Lambeth Council, who provide ongoing funding, as well as strengthening links with various firms and companies for funding. For example, BCA's current exhibition partnership with JP Morgan forms part of their strategy to become largely independent from public funding. BCA's approach towards issues of funding and independence is echoed throughout the Black archives researched for this report, who similarly reported the need for Black archives to be independent of public funding so as to gain much-valued independence in a sector that too often attaches unattainable caveats and clauses to funding contracts. Hannah also noted BCA's strategy to strengthen ties and relations with British universities such as Goldsmiths College, with whom they currently have a good relationship. The BCA currently co-convenes a course on Black British History with Kings College, bringing a significant number of African American students to study Black British history at the BCA.

In a discussion about the BCA as a national institution, Hannah also cautioned against the BCA overshadowing regional archives of equal importance. She described this as an important concern of the BCA that must be continually kept in balance, particularly in extending its support to smaller archives, whilst at the same time positioning itself as a national

depository. Hannah noted that the BCA was to guard itself against developing an emblematic archival “colonial mentality of, ‘this is ours now’”, by ensuring that materials deposited are for the use and empowerment of the community.

The report will now turn to smaller archives, first in London and then the rest of the UK, to further explore the roles, challenges and opportunities of British Black archives.

### **George Padmore Institute, London**



George Padmore Institute Logo

Photo Source: <https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org>

George Padmore Institute (GPI) is an archive, educational resource and research centre located in Finsbury Park, North London. GPI was established in 1991 by John La Rose and Sarah White (Ishmael 2018). John La Rose, born in Trinidad, arrived in Britain in 1961. In 1966 he funded New Beacon Books, the first Caribbean publishing house, bookshop and international book service in the UK. John’s intention of setting up New Beacon Books was related to his formative experience in the Caribbean:

“Growing up in a colonial society in the Caribbean made John acutely aware that colonial policy was based on a deliberate withholding of information from the population. There was also a discontinuity of information from generation to generation. Publishing, therefore, was a vehicle to give an independent validation to one’s own culture, history and politics – a sense of self – and to make a break with discontinuity.”

([georgepadmoreinstitute.org](https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org))

GPI was named after George Padmore (1903-1959), an influential Trinidadian intellectual who was a prominent figure of anti colonial movements in the 1930s and 1940s. GPI was named after George Padmore owing to his struggles for liberation, enshrining a continuing legacy in

activist and community work. The Institute states that it named the GPI after George Padmore:

“...as we see it continuing the traditions which shaped his life: independent, radical vision and outlook connecting the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, North America and Asia.”  
(georgepadmoreinstitute.org)

GPI holds archives relating to Black communities in Britain, focussing especially on the Caribbean. The archives arise predominately from John La Rose’s personal collections, as well as collections arising from New Beacon Books. The Institute holds over 11,000 records to date, predominantly centred on the Black experience in the UK post Windrush from the 1960s-1990s. The archives are divided into four categories: Culture and the Arts, such as the Caribbean Artists Movement; Publishing, particularly the development and influence of New Beacon Books; Education, especially relating to the Black supplementary school movement; and Grassroots Activism, including several campaigns born locally in North London, as well as international campaigns in Kenya and the Caribbean.

The Institute is located above New Beacon Books, which has an active community outreach schedule, often collaborating with local community groups to engage with and highlight concerns in the local area. One of their recent events included a “Build Your Own Archives!” session, part of a three-part workshop series on developing community archives. In 2010 GPI received a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to host “The Dream to Change the World Project” that ran from 2010-2015. One of the aims of the project was to open up public access to the archives; GPI hoped to:

...increase cultural awareness and to break the discontinuity of information between generations of black and minority ethnic populations in this continent and beyond. This is part of our continued struggle for social justice and racial equality.”  
(georgepadmoreinstitute.org)

The project aimed to professionally catalogue sections of the archives for public access, creating five new collections from John La Rose’s archives. Along with community activities and outreach programmes, GPI continues to catalogue materials from the archive for public use.

### *Moving Forward*

GPI is housed in a building that was owned by La Rose White, demonstrating their desire to be finally independent, particularly from state-run institutions (Ishmael 2018). This means that GPI are faced with

less pressing spatial pressures than other archives; yet operating as a self-sufficient organisation means that they are reliant on grants and donations. A recurrent thread in the experience of Black archives, GPI's desire to be independent also requires having to carefully navigate public funding bodies and institutions, an issue discussed in the following archive snapshot.

### **Nottingham Black Archive, Nottingham**



Nottingham Black Archive Logo

Photo Source: <http://nottinghamblackarchive.org>

Nottingham Black Archive (NBA) was founded by writer, poet and spoken word artist Panya Banjoko in 2010. Panya is a key, longstanding figure in Nottingham's arts, culture and heritage community, having worked on a number of community and cultural projects, such as her role as co-Director for Mouthy Poets, a Nottingham Poetry Collective, as well as setting up NBA ([ntu.ac.uk](http://ntu.ac.uk)).

In 2018, Panya published an edited collection called, "When We Speak: An Anthology of Black Writing in Nottingham" and has an extensive catalogue of publications that are beneficial in highlighting Nottingham's Black arts scene. As well as publishing and performing her poetry, Panya has also worked within the arts, museum and heritage sector in Nottingham, working with various museums and heritage centres in Nottingham. Alongside obtaining an MA in Museum Studies, Panya is currently pursuing her doctorate at Nottingham Trent University.

The first of its kind in the region, NBA arose from Panya's frustration and dissatisfaction working within the heritage sector in Nottingham. In an interview with Panya for this report, she described how her experience of the Nottingham heritage sector placing little value on Black heritage led her to formally establish the archive in 2010. Initial thinking about the archive for Panya started in 2007 when the Bicentenary of the Abolition of

the Slave Trade was commemorated in the UK. She described how the commemorations made her reflect upon the ways in which local Black history in Nottingham was being archived and celebrated in the present, an undertaking that she felt was sorely lacking, yet greatly needed by the local community. NBA was created from this desire to cater to the local community's needs, as well as for future generations. As Panya describes, her:

...priority is...to the future generation coming up so they know what people in Nottingham did for them. That's who it (NBA) is for. When I was a child, having the question levelled at me: "What have you done for this country?", can be answered by, "Well in that age, x amount of people from the West Indies fought in WW1...those people came here and settled in Nottingham, and helped to build this city" ...so we can give concrete examples.

Panya's admonition that the future generations should have "concrete examples" of Black history in Nottingham speaks to important on-going discussions on citizenship and migration in the UK in light of the recent Windrush situation. Thus, NBA's statement cause is "Keeping the past in the present" and its mission is:

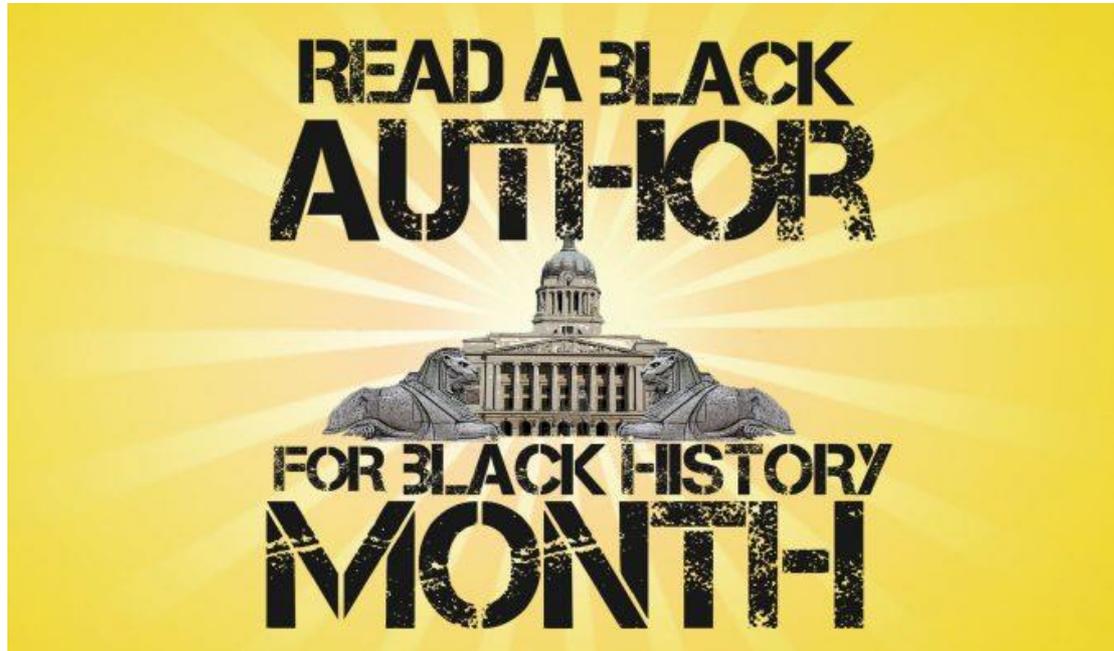
...dedicated to collecting, preserving and celebrating the histories of people of African descent in Nottingham. The NBA programme of exhibitions and events provides a platform from which to share the diversity of cultures originating from Africa and the Caribbean, past and present. The collection promotes the teaching, learning and understanding of African Caribbean peoples' contribution to Nottingham and provides an accessible permanent record of the richness of the Black experience in Nottingham.  
([nottinghamblackarchive.org](http://nottinghamblackarchive.org))

NBA's collection "holds some of the earliest documents relating to the formation of Black community organisations in Nottingham, as well as a growing archive of oral histories, including many from the first generation of Africans and Caribbeans to reside in Nottingham". The archive also holds photographs, articles, newsletters, books and political letters dating as far back as the 1940s and the collection is divided into 5 categories: Object, Photograph, Print, Transcripts and Video  
([nottinghamblackarchive.org](http://nottinghamblackarchive.org)).

NBA has a unique organisational structure that includes a Council of Elders, set up in 2012, from the local Nottingham African-Caribbean community. The Council emerged from a series of Community Dialogue events that NBA organised with the intention of bridging the generational

gaps between older and young members of the community. The Council was set up as a result of the Elders from the community wanting to share their stories and histories with the younger generation. The Council's aim is to "give the Elders a voice in how their history is collected and interpreted and also acknowledge their work and achievements as pioneers" (nottinghamblackarchive.org).

NBA is thus significantly active in the local community, organising several oral history projects such as the 2018 Windrush Day, a government funded event, Rally Round and the Community Capsule project that documented the experiences of African and Caribbean men and women during WWII. NBA have also created effective partnerships with local institutions, for example with the New Art Exchange for the "Windrush: Journeys to Nottingham" event in January 2019 (nae.org.uk) and the Afro-Caribbean National Artistic Centre in 2011, to host an Intergenerational Project. One of NBA's aims is to raise awareness of Black authors in Nottingham, by hosting "Read A Black Author" events and producing publications, as well as collecting publications by Black authors in Nottingham. Despite NBA's active and ongoing community work and collecting, there is currently no permanent space for the archive in Nottingham.



Read A Black Author NBA Poster

Photo Source: <http://nottinghamblackarchive.org/portfolio/21st-october-read-a-black-author-in-public/>

Panya described how the archive began in her living room, where it stayed for three years, then moved to a storage unit for five, and then finally

moved to a space in the centre of the city. The archive has had to move from that space and is currently looking for a permanent space to house it. NBA echoes the constant mobility experience characteristic of Black archives, a precarious experience that places pressure on the continuance and upkeep of the archive.

NBA also faces pressures from a financial standpoint. Panya operates NBA with no core funding. The archive relies on applying for public funding and organises events around funding received. With regards to funding, Panya commented that she was:

“...cautious of funding as when you get funding, the funders can say what they feel should be the priorities”.

Panya noted that receiving smaller pots of funding from various sources allowed a certain amount of freedom to NBA operations and the directions it took. Panya’s views on funding reflect the various debates around funding and independence that were found to be central to discussions with independent, non-institutional Black archives. In relation to this, the lack of funding also places pressure on the archive’s organisation to maintain it, and reveals the personal responsibility that individuals involved in maintaining archives often bear. Panya for example noted how the setting up and maintaining of the archive has changed her life in many ways. She talked about the questions she often personally encounters about the archives such as:

“How do you maintain it? How do you collect? When you do collect? You’re working and doing other things and it is another big thing in your life. It is a responsibility, and you don’t want to let the community down either.”

The sense of responsibility to one’s community was reflected throughout all discussions with Black archives for the report. Below, the report will turn to the opportunities and challenges NBA face with moving the archive forward.

### *Moving Forward*

One of the major challenges NBA faces is negotiating a permanent space for the archive. Panya envisions this to be a purpose-built space, one that is dedicated to the history and experiences of Nottingham’s Black communities. Panya noted that NBA’s existence was closely related to BCA’s standing as a national institution, highlighting that funding for a purpose-built space for the NBA was difficult, as she noted that funders were of the view that “you’ve got BCA, you don’t need anything else”. Panya here is importantly pointing to how the BCA as a national institution

can affect the fortunes and funding capacity of smaller, regional archives. This also speaks to critiques of BCA, and indeed other national institutions based in London, often being London-centric. Panya felt that the NBA was important in documenting Nottingham Black history specifically, work that the BCA would perhaps not have the same impetus to undertake.

Despite these challenges, Panya saw the archive as an opportunity to reframe debates and discussions around Black identity in Nottingham, ensuring that future generations have access to historical and contemporary resources on Black concerns in the city. As Panya contended, NBA is a “part of British history”, a thought also echoed by other Black archives, one of which will be discussed next.

### **Vanley Burke Archive, Birmingham**

The Vanley Burke Archive in Birmingham is based upon the materials collected by Vanley Burke, an eminent British Jamaican photographer, artist and community activist. Vanley, born in Jamaica in 1951, migrated to England in 1965. For his tenth birthday, Vanley was given a camera, beginning his long-held interest in photography and particularly photographing Black communities. Residing in Birmingham, Vanley noted that the historical migration to England from the Caribbean was not being documented. He thus began to earnestly document the migration stories of Caribbeans arriving in England from the 1960s. Vanley felt that this time was a unique and special moment in history that required special attention; many of these images can be found in his various publications and exhibitions, such as the 2012 photo book, “By the Rivers of Birminam”. Vanley became interested in all aspects of Black migratory experience in Birmingham and, along with photographic documentation, began to studiously collect a wide variety of materials related to Black experience in the city.



Vanley with materials from the archive the “At Home With Vanley Burke” exhibition at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2015

Photo Source: <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/home-photographer-vanley-burke>

In an interview with Vanley about this period of intense collecting, he noted that he was not interested in donating the materials to an established museum, as he felt that the materials may not be utilised for the best purpose. Instead, Vanley envisioned that he and the Black Birmingham community, starting with the materials collected, would “build our own museum”. Thus, Vanley initially stored these materials in a shed in his home. However, an eventual fire would mean many of the materials were greatly damaged or destroyed. Vanley described how Pete James, a curator at the Library of Birmingham, urged Vanley to transfer the materials to the Library of Birmingham for safe keeping and storage. The material became the Vanley Burke Archive that is still currently stored at the Library of Birmingham. Notably, Pete James assured Vanley that Vanley would retain ownership of the archive, and that it would only be transferred to the Library for storage and safekeeping purposes alone. This points towards questions of institutional ownership and transference that Black archives encounter when working with larger institutions.

As noted above, Vanley expressed a strong sense that what he was collecting was part of British history and should be viewed as such by the wider community. He contends that the archive “places people within the context of British history, which otherwise wouldn’t be available to them”. He also contended that the navigation of the academic world and the

public world with regards to archives must be thought upon closely, as archives should not be “closed off for academic purposes”. Vanley’s aim for the archive to be accessible and for the benefit of the community informs the next steps for the archive.

### *Moving Forward*

A 2007 Heritage Lottery Fund Grant employed Arike Oke, BCA’s newly appointed Managing Director, to professionally archive Vanley’s materials. The archive consists of numerous photographs, books, magazines, pamphlets, leaflets and objects Vanley had been collecting for over forty years, and still continues to collect. The archive, stored at the Library of Birmingham, is administered by Connecting Histories and Birmingham City Archives, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Vanley, however, has plans to develop a permanent, dedicated space for the archives and the legacy of the Black historical and contemporary presence in Birmingham. Vanley cited the Schonberg Institute in Harlem, New York as inspiration for the space he hopes to initiate. One of the aims of the building would be to collect and store one of every book written by or about Black people in Britain. A repository such as this would be the first of its kind in Britain and Vanley plans to extend this collection to audio-visual materials such as vinyls, cassettes and video tapes.

Vanley hopes that the archive can develop and expand its partnerships and reach within the community. Working with John Doland and Tina Hamilton on the building project, the team plan to organise a conference and publication on the archive that coincides with the Commonwealth Games to be held in Birmingham in 2022.

In response to the question of what motivates Vanley to continue working for the archive, he said:

“If we do not write our own history, we can’t blame anyone else for writing what we don’t believe. It is important we get involved in documenting.”

The importance of community documentation and archiving, an important thread demonstrated by Black archives, is explored further below.

### **NOMAD/Somali Archives, London**

The history of East African migration to the UK is an important part of Black British history. However, in the telling of Black migration to the UK, it often becomes excluded and absent from mainstream narratives of migration. Abira Hussein, a London-based Research Assistant and community activist, expressed these concerns in an interview, explaining

that the formation of archives based on the Somali experience in the UK was partly to fill this gap. Abira's work began with a community project called "The Missing Chapter", with the Autograph Gallery in London, which sought to "address the lack of visual representation of Britain's diverse communities in cultural history" ([themissingchapter.co.uk](http://themissingchapter.co.uk)). For Abira, this project highlighted the lack of archives or records related to the historical Somali presence in the UK.

Since this initial project, Abira's work has engaged with developing archival and documentation work focused on the Somali community in the UK. In 2018, Abira was involved with the "Healing Through the Archives" project with Numbi Arts, a London Tower Hamlets based Somali community organisation. Abira currently runs Nomad Project, centred on workshops that engage Somali communities using "immersive mixed reality and web-based technology to contextualise archival Somali objects with the people and traditions to which they belong" ([nomad-project.co.uk](http://nomad-project.co.uk)). Thus, Abira predominately collects Somali archival material via projects and, as such, there is not a permanent, dedicated space for the collection of materials she has gathered.



Image Courtesy of: Mnymoscene

## Nomad: Archiving Somali History in 3D

Saturday 6 October, 2.00-4.30pm

Do you have a family heirloom that you would like to add to an online virtual archive of Somali cultural heritage?

Join us for 'Nomad', a Mixed Reality project by Abira Hussein and Mnymoscene inviting you to explore Somali cultural heritage and tradition in a uniquely immersive way

Join Abira Hussein and Sophie Dixon (Mnymoscene) will help to digitise a cultural object in 3D using a technique called photogrammetry, the science of making measurements from photographs allowing of major artefacts. Workshop participants will then have the opportunity to turn an item from your culture or family history – into a 'virtual heritage object' uploaded online to the 'Nomad' archive.

The workshop free but there are only 10 places available. Book here: <https://bit.ly/2xst3UA>

Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives  
277 Bancroft Road • London • E1 4DQ

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Library Learning Information

### Nomad Project Poster

Photo Source:

<https://twitter.com/AbiraHussein/status/1044180923103809536>

### *Moving Forward*

One of Abira's aims is to make archives of Somali heritage accessible for the Somali community and beyond. She poignantly noted that the importance of maintaining a community archive was in "working towards your own liberation". For Abira, this was particularly vital for young Black youth, who she felt needed a sense of continuation with their history in order to thrive in the present.

Abira described some of the challenges she had faced as an independent researcher and activist working on various Somali heritage projects. One central challenge she noted, was the difficulty in accessing funding as an independent researcher, describing how emphasis is placed on

universities and larger institutions. She commented that “bureaucratic barriers, don’t allow us to flourish in their space”. Abira also noted that funding is often directed to large-scale historical projects such as those on WWI, with a weaker focus on smaller communities and migratory heritage projects. This, she contended, meant she experienced “constant precarity: you’re always on edge, on how you will survive”. Moving forward, Abira is seeking funding to develop a website to digitise and host the materials she has collected. This, she believes, would be the start of a concerted effort to centralise and permanently archive Somali heritage.

### **Race Archive, Manchester**

The Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust, commonly referred to as the Race Archive in Manchester, was created in 2001 in memory of murdered teenager, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah. Ahmed was murdered by a fellow pupil in the playground of a Manchester school in a racially motivated attack. The Archive was set up in his memory to serve the community and to “share knowledge of the contributions of BME communities to British history” ([racearchive.org](http://racearchive.org)).

The archive is housed within the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre in Manchester Central Library and contains materials collected by various activists in Manchester from the 1970s. Archival materials are often donated by local heritage projects and well as individual donors. Recent archival material was collected by the archive from the Manchester Refugee Support Network in which twenty audio interviews were conducted in 2015-16. Other archival material includes The Hulme Study collection containing a large body of materials documenting plans to regenerate the Hulme area of Manchester in the 1990s and The Macdonald Inquiry collection that contains material from the Inquiry into the death of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah.

The archive and resource centre receive core funding from Manchester City Council and The University of Manchester. The archive has also been awarded grants from public funding bodies, for example received a large grant from Heritage Lottery Fund for a three-year project called, “Coming in From The Cold”. The archive currently employs a full-time archivist and a trainee archivist from its core funding pool.

#### *Moving Forward*

Nigel De Noronha, a RACE group committee member who also sits on a steering group for the ‘Coming in from the Cold’ project, contributed some thoughts to the report with regards to the opportunities and challenges the archive faced. Central to Nigel’s thoughts on Black archives was how to properly commemorate Black issues and concerns, particularly when they

were pertaining to often contentious circumstances. One of the insights Nigel offered was the digitisation of Black archives to make them more accessible to all members of the community. Nigel also noted that despite the archive's core funding, the precariousness of the archive was an ever-present "existential threat", owing to the current rolling back of public infrastructure. Nigel noted that the archive is currently secure in its position in Manchester but highlighted that the contemporary experience of Black archives was that they were too reliant on individuals. For Nigel, this meant that every new generation of activists had to go through a process of building on foundations that should already be secure. This, along with the ever-present struggle to acknowledge Black history as British history, was one of the reasons the Race Archive continued to exist.

## **Key Findings**

The report's research into Black archives has engendered three key findings, outlined below.

### **In/Security**

The above snapshots of Black archives across the UK have demonstrated the continuum between the precarity of Black archives with the precarity of Black lives. All the archives presented in this report show various degrees of precariousness, an experience seemingly embedded in the existence of Black archives. Black archives exist within various modes of survival in order to stay afloat, dealing with constant rupture and renewal. These ruptures however also provide opportunities to renew and to instigate movements and initiatives that will make the archives more secure.

### **In/Dependence**

The tension between the desire to be independent and the need to access funding pools was a key concern for the archives. The archives all expressed a desire to be independently run, with the local community at the helm. However, the archives recognised and highlighted the funding constraints that were often placed on the archives' objectives, attempting to steer the archive towards the funders' various agendas. This means that several of the archives work towards an independent strategy, where they can maintain relative control of the archive and its outputs.

### **Local Networks**

Each archive demonstrated a particular and unbreakable link to their locale. The concept of a "community archive" was key to each archive's attempt to engage with and promote the archive as a core part of the local community. This often meant organising workshops on local history, oral history projects and outreach programmes that connected with local concerns. The archives frequently connected with local heritage and

cultural networks, initiating fruitful partnerships and supporting community engagement. Black archives' close links to their locales also highlighted the BCA's role as a national institution situated within London and its relationships to smaller, local archives. The at times uneven dichotomy between a national institution and local community organisations demonstrates the need for greater dialogue and investment.

### **Conclusion**

As noted in the introduction, this report has been an indicative mapping of Black archives in the UK. Going forward, a more comprehensive report of issues regarding Black archives is needed. This report however can be viewed as the first step into highlighting the importance of Black archives and the need for further, ongoing research. The report has also sought to de-centre London as the centre of Black experience in the UK. Through this decentralisation, a wealth of unearthed histories can be explored and uncovered across the UK, solidifying Black presence as an intrinsic part of the nation's cultural fabric. As the Black archives have themselves echoed above, Black history is British history.