
Black History Month at the University of East London



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INTRODUCTION

The University of East London (UEL) has been celebrating Black History Month for some years now. Since 2006, however, library and learning services has taken the lead in organising celebratory events in the university.

It all started when our vice chancellor encountered Bernard Forrester, a charismatic head of collections, on a visit to Texas Southern University. Texas Southern is a predominantly black university renowned for its inclusive approach to higher education, and its library possesses some rich special collections. An idea about lending UEL part of this collection led to the setting up of a small working group to explore some ideas around this. Membership of the group was drawn from all our libraries and from all grades of staff and included the authors of this article: Michelle Marie Clarke-Campbell, who is also a performance poet, and Carol Hughes, also an artist.

The group developed the initial plan to exhibit some of Texas Southern's materials into a more ambitious series of events to take place throughout October that year. These included a public lecture by Bernard Forrester (attended by more than 80 people from our university and the broader community), followed by poetry readings and a discussion panel; painting and poetry workshops for local schoolchildren; and the exhibition

itself. This featured books and pamphlets from the Charles F. Heartman collection relating to the British and American slave trade, the first time the documents had been exhibited outside the United States. These were supplemented with examples from our own archives, the Hackney Empire Theatre archive and Diversity Art Forum, which demonstrate black achievement in performance, writing and the visual arts.

Our Black History Month proved such a success that we were asked to do it again the next year and it has now become a regular part of our calendar. What follows is a description of our activities in October 2009, with a particular focus on the workshops we have been running for local schoolchildren.

CREATIVITY, CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

Each year we have sought to base our activities around a particular theme. So the inaugural event, described above, centred upon the Charles F. Heartman exhibition and was called 'Black histories and the hidden mysteries of African heritage' (see Figure 1). The following year it was 'Keeping the peace? Gangs, culture and identity' and this was also a great triumph. We explored the rise of gun and knife crime amongst young people and invited the local community to discuss responses and possible solutions to this growing problem. Young people participated and many positive ideas and opinions were shared. In 2008, we explored the many colours of black British fashion and this year our theme was 'Creativity, challenge and change: the visual and the verbal', a look at how black history is expressed through music, poetry and comedy.

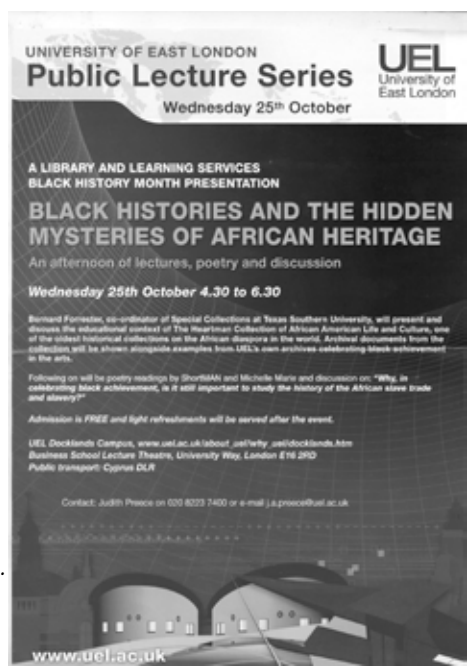


Figure 1. Flyer

Our main event last October included poetry, comedy, gospel singing and live debate. (See Figure 2.) Readings by myself (Michelle Marie) and shortMAN were followed by performances from the award-winning gospel singer Adelaide Mackenzie and comedian Quincy. All the performers then joined UEL academic Dr Kimani Nehusi in a discussion in which they and the audience explored questions of race, culture and identity. We also hosted cultural stalls of Egyptian jewellery, books and African couture designs.



Figure 2. BHM performers and debate panel, 2009. Left to right: Adelaide Mackenzie, Michelle Marie Clark-Campbell, Quincy, shortMAN, Carol Hughes, Dr Kimani Nehusi.

THE ART AND POETRY WORKSHOPS

Perhaps the most exciting and rewarding aspect of our Black History Month activities is the workshops we run for local children. The number and size of the school groups visiting us has grown every year and in 2009 more than 160 children from three local primary schools enjoyed our poetry and art sessions. Here, the authors give a personal insight into what they do.

The poetry workshops (by Michelle Marie)

'The poetry workshops embodied self-exploration and self-empowerment with a central theme of "describing our heroes". All the children wrote poems, even those who felt they couldn't at the beginning of the workshop. The key to this is the elements of inspiration and self-empowerment that the workshops personify. With empowerment at the centre of all activities, the children found that their doubts faded and their self-belief shone bright and they produced some impressive and very imaginative creative pieces. Children from the ages of eight to eleven participated and they choose a wide spectrum of heroes for their poems, from Benjamin Zephaniah to Leona Lewis. Their heroes included

superheroes, pop idols, poets, family members and historical figures, while others chose themselves; some even chose trees and the air we breathe as their heroes.' [See Figure 3.]



Figure 3. Poetry workshop

The art workshops (by Carol)

'I have 22 small faces crammed around the large computer screen to view the introductory slide-show session I have prepared for one of our Black History Month school workshops. I am going to ask the children to "customise" their trainers. Nine- to ten-year-olds produce really imaginative, colourful and uninhibited work and I want as much of their individuality to come through as possible as they create their shoe designs. I especially do not want them to fixate on drawing a perfect copy of the shoe templates I have given them for reference. Often they worry so much about the accuracy of their drawing that they never complete the activity. I remind them not to trace but to use their own skills of observation alongside their imagination to draw their version and perception of a trainer they want to wear. It can be as extravagant and flamboyant as they wish. When finished they should name their trainer based on the features they have drawn and not use existing brand names. [See Figure 4.]



Figure 4. Art

'These days, both high-street and manufacturer websites offer customers the option of creating the design and styling they want. The trainer is now taken for granted as the iconic symbol of "representing", reflecting not just a fashion choice but a person's music, sports, sub-cultural or even gang allegiances. I show the children slides of Michael Jackson commemorative customised Nikes and others that range from highlighting Dafur atrocities and Iraqi conflict veterans to celebrating Hello Kitty, Spiderman and Bob Marley.

'I want to show them how important access and choice are in a person's ability to reflect their identity. They see images of kings, courtiers and warriors from 16th-century Benin bronze plates which once adorned the royal palaces of their kingdom. They are regally dressed, with accessories to reflect their status and wealth. I then show black people still in slavery, looking worn, weary, ragged and dirty, with the demeanour of a subjugated people, towards the end of the American civil war in the 1860s. The latest brightly coloured designer trainers for 50 Cent, Kayne West and Missy Eliot get "ooohs" and "aaahs" from the children, while Nike's black and beige first commemorative Black History Month 2008 sneaker (to acknowledge the black consumer input in their global success) gets a more reserved response.

'The children now have enough background visual information to begin creating their own designs. [See Figure 5.] When we put up our "gallery" of drawings there are numerous colourful, innovative and exciting designs. The children have given them fantastic names like "Lightning", "Terminator", "Supa hero slings" and "Twinkl". There is even one called the "I love chicken show", complete with smiley face and drumstick in hand as its logo, which has us all laughing.'



Figure 5. Art workshop

CONCLUSION

The University of East London is an inclusive regional university that is proud of its diversity. Black History Month is an opportunity to celebrate this diversity, and library and learning serv-

ices has played a leading role in doing this. We have been able to draw upon the passion, commitment and unique talents of our own staff to devise and develop fresh and popular programmes that have placed us at the centre of our university's cultural life. The events have also allowed us to reach out significantly to the local community and, we hope, to educate, entertain and inspire.