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Provocation paper

‘The social vocabulary of Hidden Presence: British History and the need to talk through the silence and acknowledge true stories of African presence’

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I am addressing this topic as a filmmaker not a historian, but what both professions have in common (to a certain degree) is that we like to tell stories. ¹ A contemporary story I’d like to start with is a true one – a friend of a friend has a daughter in a secondary school in a semi-rural community. The girl was talking to her friends in class about how one of her parents came from the Caribbean but originated from Africa. The teacher, when overhearing this conversation, tried to explain it by saying that the reason Africans left the continent on mass was due to a huge flu pandemic, and that's why they ended up in the Caribbean and elsewhere around the globe. No mention of the slave trade. ² Who knows what the teacher was thinking? Was he trying to spare the "embarrassment" of the child by side-stepping mention of the slave trade? Was he at a loss for how to explain the complexity of the slave trade to young people, and said the first thing that came to mind? What is a wilful act of sweeping the slave trade under the carpet, not seeing it as important enough to tell the facts? Or was he himself ignorant of the history and uneducated? When the girl went home confused and told her father, and he was in disbelief, asking if she had heard him correctly. When I shared news of this story on Facebook, there was immediate outrage at the "shocking" behaviour of the teacher, with some calling for him to be sacked. A friend of mine, herself a teacher, interjected arguing that he should not be sacked, rather that he

¹ It could be argued however that the departure in the professions is, for historians, “Getting facts right generally trumps good storytelling.” William Cronon (2012) – whereas the accusation often levelled at historical filmmakers is that, (in a quote regularly attributed to Mark Twain, though ironically might not be), "Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story, unless you can't think of anything better."

should be retrained. This was a vitally important intervention in the conversation, as sacking the teacher moves nothing forwards. Working with him at least takes you somewhere. Whatever the motivation of the teacher, and it is an answer I am not privy to, the incident exacerbates DuBois’ contention (picked up by Gilroy, 1987), asking Black people, ‘How does it feel to be a problem’, and a perpetual victim? The ‘done thing’ in the social vocabulary of a problem and awkwardness, particularly in England, is to not mention it, to discretely brush it aside – ‘everything is fine.’

The problem is that this brushing aside creates a vacuum – a gap in context where facts should be – and the human tendency is to fill those gaps with our own assumptions and imagination, and I have witnessed that happen first hand (Sobers and Mitchell: 2013). During a participatory media project in 2007 called Re:Interpretation, in partnership with the National Trust, we took various groups to a range of National Trust properties to explore their connections with the slave trade and the remaining legacies. One such trip involved taking a group of African heritage young people to Clevedon Court, which owned by the Elton family, has very direct connections with slavery (Coules: 2007. Dresser: 2001 and Mitchell: 2010). We were shown around the whole property by a tour guide who did not mention the Transatlantic slave trade once, even though he knew we were there for that purpose. On the coach on the way back, we filmed the young people and asked them about their visit. After the niceties of saying they enjoyed it, one girl interjected with the accusation; “they never told us about the slaves and where they were kept! I saw some steps going down in the basement; I bet that was a dungeon where they kept the slaves!” Very quickly other young voices agreed with her, and assumption, conjecture and myths filling the vacuum in the absence of acknowledgment and facts. This is an example of how silence and gaps in the facts can allow speculation, and more seriously, confusion, resentment and animosity to fill those spaces – a visualisation of the tension between the facts and the feelings. The young people demonstrated how naturally inquisitive, but already distrustful minds, can collectively build a social vocabulary to try and make sense of gaps in historical contexts. They knew they were not entirely comfortable or supported in that process, mindful they were not being told the whole truth.

When British spaces, rural and otherwise, are full of celebrated and re-told myths and legends – from sites such as Stonehenge through to character based folklore such as Robin Hood – why do some resist to allow true stories, which are no less fantastical than the fictions, to also have a

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3 This intervention was given by English teacher Shauna Stewart on my Facebook wall – 6.9.13. At first I was in agreement with the calls for the teacher’s sacking, but Shauna’s argument for retraining made me think differently. I have worked with Shauna on creative media projects since she herself was at school, and she always had ambitions to become a teacher, and was passionate that more Black teachers were needed to inspire the upcoming generations. So her position on this, as a relatively new (Black) teacher negotiating these tensions, was very important.

4 “Abraham Elton III invested in at least three slaving voyages as well as in the colonies of Maryland and Virginia.” (Coules: 2007)
space at the story table? One of the reasons I became a documentary filmmaker is because I believe truth is more fascinating and enlightening than fiction. There are fascinating examples of Black presence in British history, such as Nathaniel Wells in Chepstow. An enslaved African from St Kitts, Nathaniel was the product of his enslaved house maid mother being made pregnant by the slave owner William Wells. Nathaniel was sent to England for education and whilst here his father died and he inherited his vast wealth and the plantation, becoming the richest Black person in the country, and one of the only Africans to receive compensation when slavery was abolished, and he was Britain's first Black Sheriff (Rainsbury: 2004, Evans: 2002 and Bressey: 2009). How do we deal with such complex and contradictory historical stories such as that of Nathaniel Wells?

Leonora Casey Carr from Antigua, buried the tiny village of East Tytherton in Wiltshire (Pocock: 2013a), has a less dramatic story than Wells, but no less impact on the idea of British history. Nigel Pocock was researching the Moravian graveyard opposite his ancestral home, and set up a renovation project with local residents. Initially interested because his own ancestors were buried there, he stumbled across Leonora’s grave stone, with mention of Antigua in the parish records, and has now dedicated large amounts of his research career to the subject of Black presence and now also looking into submerged slaving ships off the Isle of Scilly. Pocock and historian Madge Dresser have also discovered that Casey Carr, who went to school in East Tytherton and worked as a lace maker, is most likely a descendent of Edward Colston, the both celebrated and demonised Bristol benefactor who made his wealth from the slave trade and invested in the city’s infrastructure (Pocock: 2013b).

The story of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, a Princess from Dahomey, (now Benin), provides an alternative perspective of British aristocracy and the ruling classes. Brought over from Dohamey by Captain Fredrick Forbes on the ship ‘The Bonetta’, Sarah was presented to Queen Victoria, becoming her protégé and living amongst high society. Her daughter Victoria Davies became the Queen’s goddaughter, and spent much time at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight playing with the royal children (Bressey: 2005 and Myers: 1999).

These histories shed challenging light on the notion of British identity, and the conversations they stimulate create new, even if momentary, communities of interest, with renewed senses of geography. It allows a reinvigoration of the notion of ‘imagined communities’ and nationhood by Benedict Anderson (Hall: 1996), the non-geographic constructed communities populated by self-identifying empathetic individuals, fluidly reconstructing nationhood. Embracing the multi-layered strands of national identities and the moments of crossover and synergy, we can start to find an enlarged social awareness and vocabulary to tell our own interconnected stories, unconstrained by national borders.
Working in participatory media on such historical topics, I try to reconnect with the heart of my creative practice and ask myself, what purpose do stories serve? Stories entertain and enlarge reality. To borrow from Sontag (1977), they ‘thicken’ the environment, the reality they recognise as real\(^5\). They can provide allegory. They can educate and empower – (consider the stories of pre-slavery African histories, and also the rebellions on the plantations that lead up to emancipation, African freeing themselves). Stories can be told to get a reaction and stimulate debate, and to create new and refreshing perspectives with new insights, additional layers on inherited accepted narratives and paradigms. These histories are shared histories. They are not Black history or any other section of history. If we have to put a national label on it, then it’s actually British history, as it happened here. Don’t refuse it because it might not fit in with the rest of the status quo.

Mindful of the teacher spreading the alternative history of the flu pandemic, do not gloss over the bad bits to spare feelings or ignore it completely, as that is worse, and leaves room for confusion. That’s the difference between a story and a lie. This was highlighted during the Re:Interpretation project, when we took a group from a day centre to Dyrham Park on the outskirts of Bath. The tour guide spent five minutes with us – (our group mixed with the general public) – explaining many of the features in quite a small room, without once mentioning two large sculptured figures either side of the fire place, two black enslaved Africans with chains around their legs and wrists. We left the room, with eyebrows raised to the ceiling, and jaws hitting the floor (Sobers and Mitchell: 2013).

This shifts the meaning of the word ‘hidden’ in ‘hidden histories’ from an adjective, to a verb - where things are being actively concealed and kept secret, vs. not yet discovered and made public. It brings to mind the challenging clause set by Pan-African organiser Jendayi Serwah of the social responsibility of history education when she said, “Any teaching of that subject (the slave trade) without context and a proper study of pre-colonial, i.e. pre 16th century Afrika (sic) is a psychological and historical injustice/inaccuracy affecting all children especially black children. Our history did not start there and a perpetuation of this myth is very damaging”. \(^6\) I welcome the discourse of Black presence in rural British landscapes, in addition to, and separate from, the dominant discourse of the transatlantic slave trade. \(^7\) It realigns and challenges the relationship

\(^5\) Sontag was talking about photography, though I argue this specific descriptor is as relevant for the concept of ‘story’.

\(^6\) Quoted from my Facebook wall on 6.9.13 in response to the debate about the teacher who said Africans left the continent because of a flu pandemic.

\(^7\) The argument that slavery is not the total story in relation to African history is one that often has to be made by commentators, as it is too often forgotten and taken as the only historical African story. Jamaican Rastafarian dub poet and social commentator Mutabaruka is widely quoted as saying, “Slavery is not African history, slavery interrupted African history.” Writing in the Guardian, historian Miranda Kauffmann (2012) argued the point in an article titled ‘Slavery shouldn’t distort the story of black people in Britain’, in relation to the historic Black presence in Britain from the 16th century onwards.
of the African diaspora living here, and starts a new conversation about the feeling of British and English identity for generations younger than me, not least my children, aged 12 and 9. I am currently working with Chepstow Museum and Ffotogallery in Cardiff on a project called ‘Hidden Presence’, where we have just recruited a Creative Media Worker for a public engagement programme about the story and conceptual legacy of Nathaniel Wells, and we are soon to commission an artist to explore visual responses inspired by his life. I believe it is important that these ‘hidden’ history stories exist on different platforms in different formats, as that not only helps keep the characters of those stories alive in their legacy, but also alive in our collective consciousness, more embedded and comfortable as an idea, and not as DuBois suggested as ‘a problem’, in our social national vocabularies.

References


