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Cultural archaeology and historical geographies of the black presence in rural England

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A B S T R A C T

This paper focuses on the exclusion of black peoples from the English countryside. It particularly considers how white imaginaries of the English rural have ignored historical geographies of the black presence. Firstly the paper reflects upon the heritage of Englishness as represented in and through the rural tradition. It then presents some cultural excavations of black history undertaken by academics, community scholars and local history groups and asks how the histories they reveal challenge ideas of rural histories of England. The paper then considers how historical geographies of anti-racism may complement these new takes on rural heritage and provide a counter narrative to 'traditional' English rurality.

Caribbean Eye Over Yorkshire (for John Lyons)

Eye
perched over

adopted Yorkshire.
… Eye once a stranger
to silver birch and conifer
now on first-name terms

with beech and elm and alder.

John Agard[1]

1. Introduction

2007 marked the bicentenary of the British parliamentary act to abolish the transportation of enslaved Africans in British ships, providing an opportunity for so-called 'black history' to be made central to understandings of Britishness. For some this was a chance ignored and undermined. Indeed, the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was unable to offer more than a 'statement of regret' for Britain's role in the forced migration and deaths of at least 20 million Africans (Blair, 2006). For others, the year was surprisingly successful with a number of institutions engaging with the bicentenary to a degree that was unexpected (Adi, 2008). Numerous exhibitions were held throughout the country, and although many focused on the 'great white leaders' of the parliamentary campaign, a few considered abolition from the position of the enslaved.[2] All perspectives on the slave trade and the enslavement of Africans redirected attention to the fact that black histories of England are intimately connected to the rural. Many of the unnamed servants and enslaved men, women and children who were made visible during the bicentenary year lived and worked on the country estates of the lords, ladies and gentlemen who owned them. This paper seeks to draw attention to these marginalised characters who appear within the historical geographies of the rural landscapes of England. It draws together literature on racism from rural and heritage studies and utilises my own archival research and that undertaken and collated by BASA (the Black and Asian Studies Association based in Britain of which I have been a member since 1999) and the Northamptonshire Black History Association. In combining these sources the paper illustrates how the inclusion of even a small number of 'black histories' disrupts discussions of whiteness within the rural imaginary. Although individuals are collecting together information on the black presence in rural Britain (for example,

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[1] John Agard is a playwright, poet, short-story and children's writer. He was born on 21 June 1949 in British Guiana (now Guyana). He moved to England in 1977, where he became a touring lecturer for the Commonwealth Institute, travelling to schools throughout the UK to promote a better understanding of Caribbean culture.

[2] For example, The Equiano Project Exhibition, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

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MacKeith, 2003), it is an aspect of 'black history' that is particularly under-researched and under-theorised.

1.1. Researching the black presence in Britain

In Britain the majority of research on black history is undertaken by scholars outside academia. *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* was written by the journalist Peter Fryer and although published in 1984 it has not been surpassed. In 1991 an association was formed to foster and disseminate research on the histories of black peoples in Britain. The society, now known as BASA (the Black and Asian Studies Association), is a nationwide voluntary organisation with a networked membership that includes archivists, teachers, researchers, librarians, family historians, academics, activists and those with a general interest in the subject. BASA has long lobbied around issues of history education and issues of inclusion with government departments and the MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council). They also work on specific projects with other organisations, including the National Archives and institutions such as English Heritage, campaigning for greater representations of black history in public spaces through, for example, the Blue Plaques scheme to ensure the contribution of black and Asian people to the formation of Britain's urban and rural landscapes is noted (Martin, 2005).

The Northamptonshire Black History Project (NBHP, now the Northamptonshire Black History Association, NBHA) was founded in 2002 (supported by funding from the National Lottery Fund, and Northamptonshire's Race Equality Council who led the project). The aim of NBHP was to record and promote black history in Northamptonshire over at least the past 500 years. To this end the NBHP, gathered together individuals and groups to undertake historical research, community archiving and oral history interviewing. Those who became involved with meeting the project's aims included sessional workers and volunteers drawn from a diverse array of backgrounds, educational experiences and ages, and with varying knowledge of 'black history'. The main criteria for becoming a member of the investigative team were a passion for the subject matter and the ability to be an accurate and methodical researcher.

Membership of BASA and the NBHA overlaps and the two associations collaborate on projects, most recently an educational conference 'Making the Most of It: Black History and British Education' (held in Northampton in July, 2008), which aimed to promote inclusive education and sought to involve parents and community groups as well as teachers and pupils. However, the names of these two associations reflect the complexity of recovering black histories in England (and other parts of the United Kingdom). BASA is so-called in order to take advantage of the ambiguities of the term black. Although 'African' reflects a geographically located identity, it lacks the diversity offered by the term 'black'. For example, African seems to usually imply 'Black African' and as such excludes those of Asian heritage from Africa who identify with being 'black' and political experiences that are African although not black African. The NBHP (and the resulting association) took a broad definition of the term black by including any individuals or groups who define their identity by reference to visibility vis-à-vis the effects of racism. Adding further complexity, within written archives in Britain, before the growth of what is called scientific racism in the nineteenth century, the word 'black' was applied to people of both Arab and African origin and to people from the Indian subcontinent. Thus in this paper 'black' is used to draw together people who were most likely to have been of African descent but may have also been of South Asian descent.

That such people have been lost in the archives has contributed to assumptions that 'visible minorities' do not belong in the countryside, do not exist in the countryside, and have not contributed to the formation of the countryside, leading to their increasing vulnerability in these spaces (Askins, 2008). The assumption that rural spaces can only become more multi-cultural has also contributed to their targeting by far right organisations such as the British National Party (Neal and Agyeman, 2006). The unsettling of such narratives is not an easy task for it requires a profound ideological shift in our understanding of national history (Naidoo, 2005). This essay firstly reflects upon the heritage of Englishness as represented in and through the 'rural tradition'. This tradition has become increasingly implicated in identity, as, since the 1960s, racism has shifted from a focus upon the body to the national landscape (Kundnani, 2002; Procter, 2003). In response to this, excavations of black history have been undertaken by community scholars, local history groups and some academics. This paper presents examples of this work and then considers how historical geographies of anti-racism may complement these new takes on rural heritage and provide a counter narrative of 'traditional' English rurality.

2. Excavating new cultural archaeologies

The history of the Dare family, a genealogy recovered by NBHP, highlights the historical diversity that can be found within one village. On 31 March 1770 Richard Dare, a black man, was buried, and his passing was recorded in the Gretton parish register. Gretton, an agricultural village in the north of Northamptonshire, is where Richard Dare lived with his wife Ann Medwell whom he married in 1749. Together they had ten children all of whom were baptised and appear in Gretton parish registers. Two of their sons, John and William, died at barely two years old, but many grew up in the village. One son, Robert, married Elizabeth White on 13 July 1784 with whom he had eight children. Seven were baptised and again all appear in the Gretton parish records. His sister, Anne, had an illegitimate daughter with Edward White whom she called Martha. Another of their sisters, Mary, married John Stephenson on 2 October 1780. At least three generations of Richard Dare's family grew up in the village he had made his home (Landsbergm, 2004). Many questions about the Dare family remain. Where had Richard come from? How had he made his living? As a seemingly free man, did he work alongside enslaved Africans, and if so how did this impact upon his sense of belonging to a rural community, to a black diaspora, or to England? Despite the impossibility of answering these questions, the brief family history is illuminating and forces us to ask how many rural spaces were perhaps more diverse in the eighteenth century than they are today.

The impact historical subjects such as the Dares may have depends upon how their ghostly traces are cared for and illuminated. The failure to integrate their stories into core understandings of English history, even during the bicentenary of 2007, is a reflection of how far this process still has to progress. But, as the artist Ingrid Pollard states, you do not have to look very far beneath the surface of rural landscapes to find new narratives of the past. The exhuming of these ghosts and the places they inhabit is a kind of 'cultural archaeology' (Pollard, 2004, p. 64). The term 'cultural archaeology' is one that attempts to encapsulate the desire, the need, to recover histories through the time consuming practice of digging beneath the ground, but also through the simpler process of scratching beneath the surface of cultural artefacts such as paintings.[3]

In 1682 Pierre Mignard painted the portrait of Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth. The portrait depicts Charles

[3] Scratch the Surface was an exhibition curated by Jonah Albert and held at the National Gallery, London between July and November, 2007.