

Maureen Roberts Interviewed by Samenua Seshar, Respect Due, Museum of Colour

00.01

Introduction Music

'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00:08

Samenua Seshar

You're listening to Respect Due.

00.16

Introduction music

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00.22

Samenua Seshar

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have

demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour.

In this episode, you will hear from the inspiring Maureen Roberts: author, teacher and archivist. Maureen is passionate about the histories of Pan-African and Black British communities, and has spent decades engaging the public with heritage in her role as learning officer for the London Metropolitan Archives. But Maureen began her career as an archivist with the Huntley Archives, the collection of the legendary publishers Jessica and Eric Huntley, who founded the radical London-based publishing company Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications in 1969.

So, Maureen, can you briefly describe yourself and what you do?

01.52

Maureen Roberts

So, my background is teaching. I started being an English teacher and also a writer - creative writing, poetry, short stories, and also an unfinished novel (laughs) - and I've also worked at the London Metropolitan Archives, archiving the Eric and Jessica Huntley Collection, and also using my teaching skills to bring those collections and others to the attention of the public.

02.23

Samenua Sesher

Okay, so your background is in writing and education. So, the journey from writer to archivist doesn't sound like a common one. Could you tell us how that came to be?

02.35

Maureen Roberts

Okay, so, I was working with Jessica Huntley for the publication of my first collection of poetry, and during that time I did become aware that she wanted to do something with all the material that she had collected in her lifetime, with protests and publishing and just lots of things, her letters, belonging to many different organisations. And eventually, she chose the London Metropolitan Archives, and I applied for the job that was advertised to work with the collection, and to archive that collection. And that's how, really, it began.

03:20

Samenua Sesher

So tell us what the Huntley Archives are.

03:23

Maureen Roberts

So the Huntley Archives are the work of Eric and Jessica Huntley - 20th-century campaigners, publishers - and the archive contains

material from their first entry, basically, into London, all the way through to the present day. It contains all the materials for the publishing house that they established, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, and all the campaigning that they did. So, people like Mumia Abu-Jamal who was imprisoned in America, the publishing of Walter Rodney's material and campaigns about his being not allowed back into Jamaica. It was all the books that they had published, how they had become publishers, it was all the books that they had *not* published but which were absolutely fascinating because it told you about the mindset of Black British people who were involved in literature and so on. There was a lot of poetry. There was a lot of things around the protests and the fights that had been done to gain a foothold and to be a presence, and to be Black British, even, to have that recognised. So there was material on the New Cross fire where some thirteen young people were killed.

There was a lot of information also about their interactions with the rest of the Caribbean, with their homeland, Guyana, with Africa. And also, there was really beautiful things like the letters written between Eric and Jessica in that early period, after Eric left Guyana to come to England. He came via Trinidad - his meetings with John La Rose at that point - and Jessica was in Guyana looking after their three children. And there was this lovely exchange of letters with him telling her what the journey was going to be like, how it would be for her, what the food was like on the boat, you know, that type of thing. So, unexpected gems really. And my job, as lucky as I am, blessed, I think, as I am, was that I could pull all this material out, and then represent it to our community, and we developed an annual conference. And so, I shaped that, basically, along with the Huntleys.

06.05

Samenua Sesher

And honestly, I'm listening to you kind of spellbound, thinking, 'wow!' I've been lucky enough to come to the annual conference, and it is wonderful; it's such a fantastically warm gathering of people and other publishers, and people who are interested, and yeah, it's quite wonderful. So, the Huntley Archives, the Black Cultural Archives, were founded within a couple of decades of each other, along with other cultural archives - you've mentioned John La Rose, so George Padmore Archive in Finsbury Park - and do you see the founding of these archives as a movement?

06:46

Maureen Roberts

Okay, that's really an interesting question, because, in a way, they all came from the same root in that, as a people, the African-Caribbean, African, Asian populations in Britain, their story was not being told, their story was being disregarded, and the founders of these three archive collections... they weren't doing it to create an archive, they were just doing it because that work was there to be done. So Black Cultural Archives with Len Garrison - Len Garrison was teaching young children and he wanted something to be able to teach them with, and initially there weren't the books, there weren't the pamphlets, there wasn't the artwork. So, he collected everything that he could in order to present their history, their African history, to them. And that's the kernel of the Black Cultural Archives.

And the Huntleys... Jessica threw away nothing, which was wonderful for an archivist - that she kept all the letters, all the little bits and pieces, you know... when there were racist attacks on the bookshop, which they opened in Ealing... you know, she kept the horrible notes from the Ku Klux Klan. There's all that material, the West London klavern, to boot, of the Ku Klux Klan. And the same with John La Rose, because although they're all at slightly different tangents, they're all encouraging each other. It's like a collective preservation. And with archive collections within a country, it's about sort of fifty years - any group that comes into another country, it's about fifty years and then there will be material to collect.

And the time was ripe. A lot of people were talking about the fact that well, you know, we are just not in these archive collections, in the mainstream. So, the Huntleys went into... that was a huge decision. They went into the mainstream, they went to London Metropolitan Archives. Black Cultural Archives decided to create its own archive, its own building, do its own thing. And George Padmore Institute developed from the bookshop and also created its own thing. So, you've got these two independent archives being established, along with an archive that has broken into the mainstream, because after that, everybody is trying to collect Black British history as much as possible. And if they're not collecting, their doors are being knocked down by the community to find out why they're not collecting.

9.43

Samenua Seshar

Talking about the archives in general, I want to ask you about... how do archives keep themselves relevant to people beyond formal schooling and academia?

9.55

Maureen Roberts

I think archives have a job to introduce the material within their collections to the general public and then it needs to permeate out there. I remember I was doing, I don't know, a workshop or something one Saturday, and there was an English Yorkshireman who was, I think, doing his own research on something totally different. And I'd been talking about Mary Seacole, and in the archive collection at LMA we haven't got very much on her, all we have are, like, cartoons that had appeared in The Times. Sometimes that's all you've got, and you have to build the rest of your workshop or whatever around that. And he was probably around fifty or so, and he hadn't gone down into the mines. His dad didn't want him to do that. His dad had made sure that he got an education and went into a white-collar occupation... and he looked at me and said, he said, 'Mary Seacole... when I went to school was Mary Seacole, was that part of history? Did that really happen?' And this is the thing, because if nobody... Mary Seacole, who was so huge in her time, so beloved by all those soldiers that she looked after, you know, they had huge events for her to raise money after the Crimean War... you know, there were busts made of her. I mean, this is not insignificant! And yet she's totally marginalised, forgotten. She's not even mentioned when you start talking about Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole is not even mentioned. It's as

though it never happened, because the young people don't hear about it.

And in order to make it relevant, you have to keep bringing it up, constantly. There has to be films, there have to be plays, it has to permeate the curriculum, archives have to have events, they have to have conferences, they have to have art exhibitions, they have to constantly keep repeating those things. It's like recently, we're hearing about the 'Summer of Love Concert' that happened in New York. Nobody knew about it, and it would be really easy to say it never happened. And yet, we know about it now because there was footage, there was archive material. There was something that said, 'Well you can't deny it... here it is, this is it.'

12.26

Samenua Sesher

Yes, the Questlove film. It's interesting that you say that because that's absolutely part of the reason for Museum of Colour, to make some of these materials instantly accessible the way that people expect to find them now. But you're right - it's like they didn't happen. And I learned about Mary Seacole from being in the Black Heroes of the Hall of Fame... and that's where I first heard about Mary Seacole, and I was like, 'Why don't I know about this woman, she was amazing!'

So why is it important to show that people with African ancestry have been in the UK for all this time, and the ways in which we've shaped the country's history?

13:13

Maureen Roberts

Because history and what we have in our subconscious - and the reasons why in football matches you've got bananas being thrown and monkey chants, and all of this – is because history is a story that is told to all of us, and we assume then that we know about, you know, everyone in all five continents or what have you, and if there isn't truth that is being told, we actually don't know. And there are bits of history that become conveniently forgotten. So, it's really important to keep digging this up. I mean, who knew about the African king who had so much gold that when he went travelling through Europe he destabilised everybody's economy, but the history that we get taught constantly is about enslavement, as though there was nothing before and there was nothing after, as though it was not us who fought for our freedom, as though there was no Toussaint Louverture, who was betrayed by the French. The reasons for Haiti being in the position that it's in, right, is a historical reason. The fact that it's only recently that Britain has finished paying the slave owners for their loss of property on the plantations... you can't cover it up and expect the wounds to heal. They have to be lanced, it has to ooze out.

14.52

Samenua Seshar

That's quite beautiful... you can't cover it up and expect the wounds to heal, and those wounds are evident wherever you look, like you mentioned Haiti, and at the time of recording this podcast, Haiti has been in the news and it is directly related to what was happening

centuries ago. And it might change people's understanding of Britain and these things that keep erupting if we knew more.

So, there are some projects, so things like 'Painting the Past' by English Heritage, Black History Walks in London, that, you know, that are trying to actively do things and understand that, and the push for decolonising the curriculum is part of that. But what you describe when you talk about Len Garrison and you talk about Jessica Huntley keeping everything and, you know, looking for everything that they could find... do you feel that, even now, as a community, we understand the importance of conserving our history and records of achievement? Because one of my fears is that we think that digital means it's going to happen by default. And I'm just wondering if we really understand how important it is to actually capture the footprints that we're leaving in society.

16:12

Maureen Roberts

I think that a lot of black people collect, because they sort of know that collecting the history is important, but they're not sure what to do with it. And one of the things that the Huntley Archives did was to open the door to people from the African-Caribbean community, specifically the African-Caribbean community, being open and trusting to give their material to a mainstream organisation. Because people have been burnt before when things had been given, and then they just seemed to disappear, or they sat in a basement in some box that nobody ever opened.

But what we did with the Huntley Collections and what Eric and Jessica themselves decidedly wanted - and that was my job, that's why I was there - was that this material didn't get nicely sorted, wrapped up in, you know, the correct papers and all of that, and then put neatly on shelves; they wanted it to be used, they wanted the community to have access to it. And that is just really important, because then, when people saw that, 'Oh, there's a conference, oh, there's an art exhibition, oh, this has happened, that has happened, there's a talk, there's whatever...' it was like the floodgates had been opened. And there was a clamour of people who had things, knew people... 'Oh, this person was the first psychiatrist,' so there's the Molly Hunt Collection, there is the Lionel Collection, there is all these... all of a sudden, we were overwhelmed. In fact, we didn't have the capacity to deal with everything that was out there. And people also started... like Stella Dadzie gave her collection to BCA and so on, and people started to accept the fact that that material was as important as the first item in the LMA collection, from 10...whatever.

So that's where I hope that archives will continue to go. I don't think it matters, ultimately, whether material goes into mainstream, or whether it goes into the community's own developed archives, right, but it needs to go somewhere, and it needs to be there because at least if it's there, you can access it, and you can work on it. And the other really bit of important work that needs to be done is delving into all those traditional... you know, what's at the British Library, because there's material there that's been buried for years that nobody has looked at. And Steve... S. I. Martin, Steve Martin, is doing some really important work at the British Library, he is digging up all this stuff. And it's like, well, you know, why didn't we know, why didn't we know?

19.19

Samenua Sesher

Why didn't we know? It's interesting because you talked about trust. And we don't know who will be listening to this. But how can institutions like the British Library, like the British Museum, like indeed the Bodleian - how can they ensure and establish trust?

19.56

Maureen Roberts

I think the staffing in archives has to change. So you need diversity in staffing, and at all the different levels. At the moment, it's fairly monotone, and a lot of people from a more diverse background are temporary. But it's important that those individuals become more permanent... Staffing and programming and permanent programming, not just, 'Okay, it's an anniversary, therefore, we're going to have this thing about the black community.' It needs to be an annual thing, as was done with the Huntley Conference, so that people know this is happening. 'It's happening in February, and there is somebody that you can contact that can discuss things with you,' ...that embedding into the fabric of organisations, just so that people know. That's the only way people know.

20.41

Samenua Sesher

Well, yes. And that people know where they can go, who they can trust and what to expect. So that leads me on - quite beautifully, actually - to this last question. What would you say to anybody listening to this with an interest in becoming an archivist?

20:57

Maureen Roberts

I think go and do it. I mean, that was one of the joys of working at the archive, was the different programmes that were encouraging diversity. And so quite a few young people came through that I worked with. And it is hard, there aren't immediate rewards, it's not necessarily sexy and glamorous, but in terms of satisfaction and the number of people that you will affect in the future, it's one of those things that I hope more people will actually think about as a career. You know, stick with it, and you can make the changes.

I was watching this talk by ice skaters - black ice skaters - they were talking about, you know, how they got into skating and their success. And one of the young men, he was mixed heritage - his mother was Russian and his dad was African. And he said, 'I hated it. I hated every minute of going to the ice rink.' But then he saw an African American skater, and that changed everything about what he did. And all of a sudden, he realised he could do hip hop, he could do Michael Jackson, he could do... he could bring all of that to his skating. And so, archives are pretty staid places, but once you've got it, it's like learning to write; once you know the rules you can break all of them and, you know, still end up with a really good story. So, it's kind of the same.

So, I'm looking forward to these groups of young people who will get into archives and change the way that archives are, because they have changed. Archivists used to be very much gatekeepers and, for their own survival, they had to kind of open those gates and be more nurturing and invite people in, not to keep them away from the material unless you had a degree.

23:04

Credit Music

'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

Samenua Sesher

Maureen was nominated by the Black British Museum Project for championing the histories of Pan-African communities, and black Britons. The Black British Museum Project is creating a museum celebrating Black British history, art and culture.

Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Sesher, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at <https://museumofcolour.org.uk/>. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.