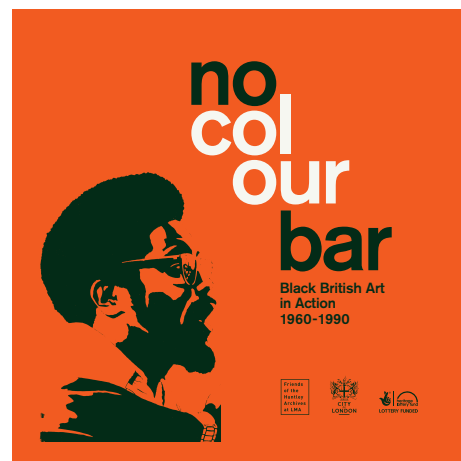


# Walter Rodney Bookshop

A film installation at  
Black Cultural Archives



Jessica & Eric Huntley, 1950s. Image from The Huntley Archives held at London Metropolitan Archives



**The Walter Rodney Bookshop was one of the first Black bookshops in the UK.**

Written and performed by Michael McMillan, this document text is an extended version of the audio voice-over of a set of films accessed via a digital touring installation. McMillan curated the Walter Rodney Bookshop, a multi-sensory installation within *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960-1990* exhibition at the Guildhall Art Gallery 2015-2016. Gary Stewart of Dubmorphology produced and edited the four films in the digital installation. These are based on four narrative themes that were presented with the *No Colour Bar* exhibition:

- 1. *From Front Room to Front Line: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications***
- 2. *Race, Revolts and Resistance: Britain in the 1970s and 1980s***
- 3. *A Day in the Life of Bogle-L'Ouverture Bookshop***
- 4. *The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books***

## **01 From Front Room to Frontline - Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications**

- Guyanese-born Jessica and Eric Huntley were political activists and came to England in the late 1950s amongst many other Post-War Caribbean migrants seeking new opportunities in Britain. British Guiana would become Guyana after independence in 1966.
- During this period the Huntleys were involved in activism and campaigning on an international level. They were key supporters of the Caribbean Artists Movement that was co-founded in 1966 by John La Rose, Kamau Brathwaite and Andrew Salkey as a platform for Caribbean artists, writers, actors and musicians settling in the UK.
- The seeds of Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications were sewn at a meeting in the Huntley's home at 110 Windermere Rd during the 1960s that was attended by amongst others Richard Small, and their daughter Accabre.
- The name 'Bogle-L'Ouverture' comes from Paul Bogle and Toussaint L'Ouverture, two instrumental figures in the resistance and revolt against slavery in Jamaica and Haiti.
- Alongside New Beacon (founded 1966), Allison and Busby (founded 1967), Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications was one of the first Black-owned independent publishing companies in the UK.
- The Huntleys later moved from 110 Windermere Rd to 141 Coldershaw Rd where they also set up the Bookshop in their front room. Writers would meet there regularly, sometimes holding poetry readings, such as with Andrew Salkey in 1974.
- Bogle-L'Ouverture hosted a meeting at the Keskidee Centre in December 1974 where the African-American activist Angela Davis spoke to an engaged audience.
- Through the Huntley's ongoing activism at home and abroad they collaborated with their friend the Guyanese academic, historian and political activist Dr Walter Rodney to produce Bogle-L'Ouverture's first publication, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (1969), which was a collection of his speeches and essays. This was followed by *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972).
- Walter Rodney was killed by a car bomb in Georgetown, Guyana on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1980. Many felt that this was an assassination carried out by forces linked to the Guyanese government.

- A packed memorial meeting for Walter Rodney was held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Islington on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1980 that was addressed amongst others by the eminent Trinidadian historian, intellectual and political activist C.L.R. James.
- The Walter Rodney Memorial Trust was set up to remember his 'profound contribution to the growing awareness and emancipation of the Caribbean working class.'
- The Bookshop was eventually renamed the Walter Rodney Bookshop.
- With the support of the Jamaican novelist, poet & editor Andrew Salkey, Bogle-L'Ouverture found and published authors from across the African diaspora and the developing world. They published a number of his books including: *Anancy's Score* (1973), *Joey Tyson* (1974), *Writing in Cuba Since The Revolution: An anthology of Poems, Short Stories and Essays* (1977) amongst others. A selection of other Bogle-L'Ouverture's publications include:
  - Linton Kwesi Johnson's first poetry collection, *Dread, Beat & Blood* (1975).
  - The celebrated Guyanese educator & author, Beryl Gilroy's, *Black Teacher* (1976).
  - Accabre Huntley's first poetry collection, *At School Today* published at the age of nine (1977) and later *Easter Monday Blues* (1983).
  - The Jamaican poet, Valerie Bloom's poetry collection *Touch Mi! Tell Mi* (1983) and her children's book, *Ackee, Breadfruit, Callaloo: An Edible Alphabet* (1999).
  - Eric Huntley's *Marcus Garvey-A Centenary 1887-1987* (1988) and *Two Lives: Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole* (1993).
  - Lemn Sissay's, poetry collection, *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist* (1988).
  - They published a number of the Malaysian poet & lawyer Cecil Rajendra's books including: *Hour of Assassins* (1983).
  - As well as literary criticism, such as Peter Nazareth's *In the Trickster Tradition: The Novels of Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejar and Ismael Reed* (1994).
  - Luke Daniels', *Pulling the Punches-Defeating Domestic Violence* (2011).
  - *Caribbean Workers' Struggles* by the renown historian Richard Hart (2012)
- The artwork for *Anancy, Traveller* illustrates how book covers and book making were created before the arrival of computers and digital technology.

- Artists like Errol Lloyd, who also created illustrations and greeting cards, designed many of the book covers.
- There were also posters by Ras Daniel Hartman that featured Rastafarian subjects that had not been seen before.
- To reach to wider readership, Bogle-L'Ouverture, with the support of volunteers would set up bookstalls at book fairs, festivals, literary and cultural events where Jessica met Maya Angelou.
- Bogle-L'Ouverture celebrated their 10th Anniversary in 1979 with a "cultural extravaganza" at the Commonwealth Institute that was compered by the actress Carmen Munroe. The event also featured a variety of performers, poets, drummers, dancers and musicians including Misty in Roots, Keith Waite, Cecil Rajendra, Linton Kwesi Johnson and others.
- Jessica was deeply passionate about young people's education. The Huntley's were actively involved in the Supplementary Schools movement and helped to provide a more rounded education: bringing in arts, music and performance as well as the state curricula. Jessica worked tirelessly to expand the creative and cultural educational vocabulary for Black families.

## ***02 Race, Revolts and Resistance: Britain in the 1970s and 1980s***

- The 1970s saw major cultural and political shifts in Britain, with police brutality, SUS 'stop and search' laws, and struggles in the labour market, education and housing that affected many migrant, and white working class communities.
- Britain also witnessed the rise of the National Front and an increase in violent racist attacks and demonstrations, to which the police and authorities seemed indifferent. This triggered the Southall uprisings in 1979.
- Between 1977-79 Bogle-L'Ouverture Bookshop was targeted by racist and fascist groups, with abusive graffiti daubed on the windows and doors, and racist literature and excrement pushed through the letterbox.
- Jessica Huntley recalled: 'The National Front used to break windows. Then we got threatening calls. They gave us seven days to move, and if we didn't get out... What's going to happen [?] We got calls from the Ku Klux Klan. They were everywhere. And, of course, we had a campaign against that and our poster was, 'We Will Not Be Terrorised out of Existence'.

- Other bookshops were also targeted including across London: New Beacon, Headstart, Grassroots, The Other Bookshop and Centerprise, and in Nottingham, Manchester and Birmingham.
- The Huntleys joined forces with other bookshops, and formed the "Bookshop Joint Action" group to raise awareness of the attacks through producing leaflets, holding public meetings and picketing the Home Office. This eventually resulted in national media coverage that forced the police to take action.
- At this moment Black was a politically inclusive term and African-Caribbean, African, South East Asian and Turkish activists made alliances through solidarity to protest, demonstrate and resist.
- Bogle-L'Ouverture met regularly with New Beacon Books and the Race Today Collective as part of an ongoing alliance. They collaborated in mobilising the Black communities' response to the New Cross Massacre when 13 young Black people died whilst attending a birthday party in New Cross in a firebomb attack in the early hours of Sunday morning, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1981.
- *The Black People's Day of Action* took place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1981 when an estimated 20,000 people march from Fordham Park, New Cross to Hyde Park. The march was peaceful, but *The Sun* newspaper reported it with headline: 'Day the Blacks ran riot in London'.
- This was also the moment of radical Black politics, Pan-Africanism when writers and intellectuals were engaged in political activism as reflected in a number of journals and independent publications. This included: *Race & Class*, *New Left Review* and *Race Today* who critically with issues affecting the Black communities in the UK that were often misrepresented in the mainstream media.
- There had already been uprisings at the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976, but when Brixton erupted in 1981 and spread to other deprived inner city areas across the UK, it marked a significant moment in British society - with other uprisings in 1985 and 2011.
- The activism of the cultural political movement during the 1970s and 1980s spurned a cultural revolution in literature, theatre, visual arts, dance and film with the emergence of several practitioners who were born and or grew up in Britain. This ushered in the *Black Art Movement* of the 1980s.
- The Keskidee Centre, Britain's first arts and cultural centre for the Black communities (from 1971 to 1992) was the vision of the Guyanese-born architect and cultural activist, Oscar Abrams and was located at 1 Gifford Street, Islington, London.

*'In years to come when researchers are digging into our thing, it will be documents like these that will really be the evidence of Britain's racism and fascism. I wanted you to know how the documents hit me, at this distance, both as present time factual record and material for history.'*

Letter from writer Andrew Salkey to Jessica Huntley, following reports of racist attacks on bookshops, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1978.

### **03 A Day in the Life of the Bogle-L'Ouverture Bookshop**

- After running the bookshop from their front room for two years, the Huntley's neighbours complained that they were using their home for commercial purposes, so they were forced moved to new premises at 5a Chignell Place, West Ealing where the Bogle-L'Ouverture Bookshop opened with a literary event on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1975. It was attended by many from the Black communities and featured readings by Linton Kwesi Johnson, Accabre Huntley and George Lamming.
- Bogle-L'Ouverture became a cultural hub for the community, a 'drop in centre' as parents, school students and teachers sought guidance about their studies, employment and experiences of racist institutional cultures and racist managers.
- The Bookshop led the way amongst other independent bookshops by having readings where writers actively engaged with their readers.
- There were memorable events, such as Louise Bennett-Coverly or *Miss Lou* whose poetry, folk songs and stories performed in creole or nation language electrified a mainly Caribbean audience even though the main author in the event was the African-American Ntozake Shange.
- Other literary events included the hilarious poetry of Valerie Bloom, readings by Caribbean novelist Faustin Charles, Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiongo, Kittian poet and filmmaker Imruh Bakari Caesar, Andrew Salkey, Sam Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, Merle Hodge, Petronella Breinburg, Cecil Rajendra. There was also Kaiso (spoken-word) by Brother Resistance, and talks, such as the South African women's rights activist and politician Ellen Kuzawayo.
- Running the bookshop was a daily creative challenge, and Jessica would be found at the back of the Bookshop managing the business of bookselling: typing letters on an electric typewriter, making phone calls and responding to enquiries from visitors.
- The Bookshop also hosted a number hosted of international visits of artists and arts groups, such as The Sistren Theatre Collective from Jamaica.

- The Bookshop closed in 1990, although Bogle-L'Ouverture would continue to publish as Bogle-L'Ouverture Press.

#### **04 The International Book Fair of Radical Black & Third World Books**

- The first International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books took place in March - April 1982, with the aim of being a "meeting of the continents for writers, publishers, distributors, booksellers, artists, musicians, film makers, and the people who inspire and consume their creative productions".
- It was jointly organised by Bogle-L'Ouverture, New Beacon Books and the Race Today Collective. The book fair was opened by C.L.R. James, and the programme included a book fair at Islington Town Hall where Black, independent and radical publishers and booksellers from across the UK, and the developing world had stalls open to the public for three days.
- There were also forums on *Black Films in Britain* with Diane Abbott, Yvonne Brewster, Horace Ové, Lionel Ngakane and Jim Pines, *Black Theatre in Britain* with Norman Beaton, John La Rose, Yvonne Brewster and Pearl O'Connor, *Writers and Critics* with Kole Omotoso, John La Rose, Rhonda Cobham and Biodun Jeyifo. There was also a *Black Publishers* forum and a *Forum on the Racist and Fascist Attacks on Black, Left-Wing and Community Booksellers and other institutions in Britain* with John La Rose, Darcus Howe and the Huntleys.
- Young students interested in writing could also attend day sessions led by Rhonda Cobham, Errol Lloyd, Earl Lovelace, Samba Mbuub and Osahon, as well as Hugh Boatswain and the Jamaican dub-poet Michael Smith.
- There was a *Recital for Piano and Flute* with Keith Waite, Vara Brama, and Richard Bobb amongst other musicians, and a *Variety Concert* with Dennis Bovell Dub Band, Rico Rodriguez, Ekome Dance Group and Ankoor Arts
- There was also an *Evening of International Poetry* compered by Linton Kwesi Johnson and included performances by John Agard, Valerie Bloom, Accabre Huntley, Mahmood Jamal, James Berry, Oku Onuora, Kamau Brathwaite, Jack Mapange, Archie Markham, Frederick Williams, and Michael Smith.
- The first International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books was attended by 6,000 people from Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Central America, the US, as well as the UK and across Europe. It was followed eleven more Book fairs up to 1995 that also took place in Manchester, Bradford as well as London.
- In 1983 Michael Smith was stoned to death in Jamaica. There were demonstrations about his killing and his memory was commemorated during a series of poetry events.

## About the Curators:

### Michael McMillan

Michael McMillan is a British born playwright, mixed-media artist/curator, and scholar of Vincentian migrant parentage. He is best known for *The West Indian Front Room* (2005-6). Recent installation-based exhibitions include: *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960-1990* (2015-16), *Doing Nothing is Not an Option* (2015), *Rockers, Soulheads & Lovers: Sound Systems back in da Day* (2015-16) and *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* (FADA Gallery (UJ), Johannesburg 2016). He has the first Arts Doctorate from Middlesex University (2010) and is currently an Associate Lecturer in Cultural & Historical studies at London College of Fashion (University of the Arts, London) as well as Research Associate with the Visual Identities in Art & Design Research Centre (VIAD), University of Johannesburg (UJ).

### Gary Stewart, Dubmorphology

Dubmorphology is a London based interdisciplinary artist and research group formed by Gary Stewart and Trevor Mathison. Through experimental approaches to sound art, live cinema and installations Dubmorphology blur the boundaries between the sonic, visual and performative. Their practice is distinguished by an ongoing investigation into the unique spaces emerging in museums, art galleries and public spaces formed by the shifting intersections between audiences, authorship and participation. Recent exhibitions, biennials, laboratories and performances include: *Uprising*, Bogota; *Multiplicidade*, Rio de Janeiro; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Art Dubai, Madinat Jumeirah; Taipei Biennial; W.E.B. Dubois Institute, Cambridge; Afterimage, Bristol; and DOCUMENTA (13), Kassel.

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