

Collaborate project proposals

Charis Beoku-Betts with support of Derby Museums (Freelance Artist)

What do you want to explore and why?

The main topic I would like to explore within this project is the experience of Black people in UK Museums.

I would like to address the following question:

What does the relationship look like with 1-3 generation migrants with a particular focus on Black People (African and Caribbean) in the context of the UK in 2021, considering Black Lives Matter, the return of the Benin artefacts and post-Covid?

1. The encounters of Black people in museums

I would like to explore the experience of Black people in museums in 2021 and how generational differences within the community are changing the ways in which African and Caribbean diaspora experience the museum. I would like to create conversations about making this a more accessible and safe place for Black people.

2. What are access barriers for the Black community?

I would like to explore the current barriers that are present before, after and during museum visits. I would widen this aspect to explore these views by comparison to other BAME groups and that of their white counterparts. I would look at perceptions of the museum and the discourse in and around the museums. I would look at who is manning the museums and how comfortable Black youth are with relating their understanding to the objects from their homeland.

3. The relationship between artefacts and spectatorship

I would explore how generations view and interact with objects, i.e. how a first generation person may have a different relationship with an object as they may have more influence from their homelands that could be directly/ indirectly connected to the object. I would like to explore if the views of second and third generation migrants have the same (more or less) connections to the object.

4. Restitution and whose narrative is dominating the conversation?

I would focus on African and Caribbean people's experience in hearing that items are being returned and the conversations around this. From previous research there are mixed views about the return in the community and listening to some of the leading debates on restitution, I wonder how many of the diasporic community groups voices are heard when for some they have a shared journey. Returning the items may have some thematic parallels with the 'go back to your country' debate. This is especially problematic as a consequence of an economic, social

and skills drain on the country. I would like to create a Black-led conversation about the topic of restitution.

Covid, migration and institutional racism have left many in the community flat and uninspired. Many from our group membership have reported that they 'just want to go home' or 'don't feel like they belong here'. This for me is a problem. Especially as I have served as a community artist for 15 years and been relatively proud of my black, African (Sierra Leone) and Caribbean (Guyanese) identity. I come from a public sociology background and I am particularly interested in social identities. I have studied how Carnival Arts and engaging in family traditions have kept the community safe when far from home. These traditions were often passed through oral and ceremonial histories.

I have been working with Derby Museums for over a year and this is the first museum I could say I have felt reasonably comfortable to work in partnership with. This is because of the Head of Interpretation's commitment to working with the community and creating an equitable space for co-productions. I have been particularly interested in several artefacts in the Derby Museum and they have kindly agreed to partner and let me explore the wider community. I have been working previously with Derby West Indian Community Association which has an active membership of over 300 members. I was taken aback by the mixed attitudes of the community when I raised the partner project. After reflection, I realised that this is how I would have felt had I not been working so closely with the Head of Interpretation. The main thing was, I was allowed to exercise my voice in a safe and supportive way.

This is something this project will address - creating opportunities to discuss and promote equity for Black people in museum spaces. The conversations around restitutions are very triggering for the community and I would like this project to explore the impact of the discussions on the community.

What are you looking for in an academic research partner?

I am looking for an academic partner that has a particular area of specialism within the UK and Black people, arts and cultural narrative. I would expect the research partner to have direct links or to be insightful of the issues experienced by Black people (African and Caribbean) in the UK and have an understanding of those cultural traditions.

They will have the knowledge and insight to create links between current and historical socio-economic conditions. I would expect the researcher to have already developed projects for local and international campaigns that have highlighted some issues.

Regarding the wider question of Black peoples' experience in the museums, I expect them to be rooted within a social science. Because I have a particular interest in some objects pertaining to fertility and reproduction rituals, I would also like to work with a researcher that has done extensive work in the area of women's health and wellbeing. I have a particular desire to work with researchers that have focused on young women's lived experiences and how they

are affected by structural and societal inequalities such as their education, career, employment and interpersonal relationships.

It is essential that the researcher is supporting, inspiring and guiding their students to reach beyond what many of them believe is possible. Encouraging students to work through the challenges, barriers and limitations to success is one of the reasons they became an academic.