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THE BOOKSHOP

A COMMUNITY GATHERS

The Bookshop sold books published by BLP, whose list specialised in topics relating to Africa and people of African descent, mainly written by Black writers. They also published works by authors of Asian origin, including Kenyan-born Jameela Siddiqi, Peter Nazareth, who was born in Uganda of Indian and Malaysian parentage, and Cecil Rajendra, born in Malaysia. A mail-order service provided for libraries, schools and other organisations based in the UK and overseas. Black-interest greetings cards (one featuring an image of a Black Christ), posters (such as a black “Mother and Child” and “Self-Portrait of a Rastafarian”), periodicals and pamphlets were sold, as were books imported from Asia and Latin America. A selection of locally produced and imported African and Caribbean arts and crafts was also sold at the Bookshop.

The Bookshop came to take centre-stage in the lives of the Huntley family and was an important space for Britain’s Black community, as well as for artists and intellectuals visiting the UK. Eric describes it as an “oasis in the desert of West London”. However, with the new opportunities the Bookshop brought, came with new responsibilities that widened the scope of the work the Huntleys had begun in Coldershaw Road. For many years Jessica was the only full-time worker in the Bookshop. Eric helped with running the business by undertaking admin tasks such as opening post and responding to letters. After a while, Jessica was able to recruit volunteers from among their friends and many supporters to work in the shop. This support increased in 1977 when Steve Lewis, a young man born in Grenada who had come to England in the late 1960s, began working regularly in the Bookshop. Along with Jessica’s, Steve’s became a recognisable face behind the counter. The Huntley children were also involved and were supportive of the family business. Accabre would go to the Bookshop after school to meet her mother. As she grew older, she worked there on Saturdays but by 1983, at the age of 16, she decided she wanted to get a paid Saturday job in another shop. Her father offered to pay her to work in the Bookshop but Accabre said she “did not feel right taking Bogle’s money”. She continued to help but not on Saturdays. Another member of the family who worked beside Jessica in the Bookshop in the 1980s was Karl, her elder son, who is now deceased. He was a great source of support, not only in the practical help he gave but for his moral support during the period when the Bookshop was attacked regularly by racist groups.

The Bookshop soon became a place of importance in the community. There one could discover new radical publications, meet authors at book launches and find books to suit children from diverse backgrounds. It also became a place for teachers to learn new ways to teach their subjects. Many came for advice when they heard about the Bookshop. Jessica recalls a typical day when the business was at its peak:

...you'd come in and they'd want to know about African history and I'd advise them about it, working lads. I remember this guy coming in... and saying: 'is it true that Africa has a history'? And this was a young man in his 20s and he said he just had an argument at work and a guy said to him that he knew a place where he could go and get information. And he came and spoke with me so I gave him information.

Through the Bookshop, Jessica had a profound effect on ordinary people as well as professionals, influencing how teachers developed their curriculum. Anne Johnson was a young, White, secondary-school teacher who taught in Southall at Featherstone High School in the 1970s. She visited Jessica when she sold books at Coldershaw Road to ask for advice on publishing her pupils' writing. Most of them were from White working-class backgrounds. Many were from the former British colonies of Barbados, Grenada, India or Ireland. The children were studying for a CEE (Certificate in Extended Education), a qualification that had little value even then and that most parents, educators and employers today have long forgotten. The flexible CEE syllabus provided Anne with the opportunity to select a writing project, "Journeys", for the final assessment that enabled the pupils to demonstrate their strengths. The results were so impressive she wanted to have the essays published.

Jessica encouraged Anne Johnson to set up a group to edit and publish her pupils' writings. Anne went on to take many of her pupils to the Bookshop at Chignell Place, where they were exposed for the first time to books by Black writers, as well as posters and greetings cards featuring black subjects, produced by artists such as Errol Lloyd, Stanley Greaves and Una Howe. The youngsters also met eminent writers in person, including Louise Bennett, the Jamaican poet and activist, popularly known as "Miss Lou", Farrukh Dhondy, an Indian-born British writer, and Andrew Salkey. Anne recalls Jessica treating her pupils as important guests, serving them drinks and biscuits and encouraging them to look at all the material on display.

The 1970s was a progressive time for teaching in schools. The Race Relations Act of 1976 and later the Swann Report of 1985 drew attention to the need for all children to have access to fair and equal education. Teachers needed practical advice and ideas on how to make changes in their classrooms. They came to the Book-

shop, not only to purchase items but also to attend workshops on “multicultural education”.

The Bookshop also led many campaigns. One of its major campaigns involved the Huntleys’ friend Walter Rodney.

Jessica recalls the idea of a book fair being discussed by the Alliance shortly after a fellow bookshop owner held two book fairs that were poorly attended. The initial discussions were led by John La Rose, who suggested holding the book fair in a community hall in North London. A few years before to this discussion, Jessica had been invited to the Annual Conference of Librarians in America. It was her first trip to the US and she took young Accabre with her. It was a very impressive event. Jessica thought it well organised, and she liked that it took place over several days, with bookstalls, speakers, book launches, music and poetry performances. Many publishers and other attendees came to the Bogle-L’Ouverture stand. It was unusual to see a female publisher, let alone a Black female one, so Jessica drew a lot of attention and interest in her work with BLP and the Bookshop in the UK. It was at this event that she met and was interviewed by the radio journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, who later became a political prisoner.

The suggestion to use a community hall for the book fair did not meet with Jessica’s approval. She would have preferred a large venue, as for the 10th-anniversary event at the Commonwealth Institute - somewhere like a town hall, with the capacity and facilities to host a wide range of programmes, to sell books and display arts and crafts. When the Alliance next met they found out that John La Rose had already booked Islington Town Hall, which they could use free of charge. It was agreed that Jessica and John should be joint directors of the book fair.

At the First International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, in 1982, the programme included a “Forum on racist and fascist attacks on Black Left-Wing and community Booksellers and other institutions in Britain”, where Jessica and Eric made significant contributions. Sarah White confirms that among the many African-American and Caribbean publishers who came to the Book Fair a significant number were Jessica and Eric’s contacts. In addition, many of the established literary and performance artists who participated were known to Jessica and Eric through having performed at events organised at the Bookshop. Jessica, however, pointed out that John La Rose also had very good contacts in the publishing and arts world.

The Huntleys' awareness of upcoming young artists came from having encouraged them by inviting them to perform at the Bookshop as well at the Book Fair, as Sarah White confirms:

...[the Huntleys] used to have these concerts which came out of the Walter Rodney Bookshop. They had good contacts on the cultural scene and they were very aware of new young artists coming up and encouraged them.... I think in the first year, the cultural concert at the end [of the Book Fair],... they were instrumental in the number of people who came.... They were always encouraging young writers, young artists by giving them space not just in the Book Fair but their own events as well.

Jessica and Eric provided accommodation in their own house and encouraged their friends and Alliance members to do the same for the overseas participants who came to the Book Fair. The idea was to create a “home from home” feel for these guests, who usually covered the cost of their own airfare, since the Alliance did not have a budget for invited guests but by providing accommodation in their homes offered a warm introduction to London, especially for first-time visitors. This resulted in Alliance members and associates developing lifelong friendships with a network of academics, publishers, writers and performers from around the world. The Alliance aptly described the Book Fair as: “A meeting of the continents for writers, publishers, distributors, booksellers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, and the people who inspire and consume their creative productions.”

The first Book Fair, of which John la Rose and Jessica were joint directors, was held from 1 to 3 April 1982 and was opened by Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James. Over 100 publishers participated from Africa, the Caribbean, North America and Europe. There were also librarians, educational institutions, booksellers as well as writers and artists. In excess of 6,000 people came to the Book Fair, which included an associated programme of events that ran between 28 March and 3 April, featuring film, theatre and music alongside literature and activism.