



Black Cultural Archives: response to the March 2021 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report

SUMMARY

Black Cultural Archives (BCA) refutes the approach and findings of the report on the basis of its poor use of data, unsubstantiated conclusions and British history inaccuracies.

BCA acknowledges and recognises that this report joins the body of past reports and inquiries into racism and inequality which, despite having collectively over 500 recommendations collectively, have not been implemented.

BCA's community of interest is people of African and African Caribbean descent in the UK. Our core mission is heritage based and we recognise and offer solidarity to the other ethnic groups and organisations whose areas of specialism are side-lined and done a disservice in this report.

FULL RESPONSE

Background

In June 2020 Black Cultural Archives was invited to join the Home Office's Cross Government Windrush Working Group. This group was given the task of ensuring that the recommendations in Wendy Williams' March 2020 'Lessons Learned' report [\[1\]](#) were implemented. In that group BCA is the sole heritage voice that has engaged directly with people dubbed the 'Windrush Generation', hosting legal advice surgeries, exhibitions and public programming that celebrates and critically engages with the history, experiences, and the societal contributions of people identified as 'Windrush'.

In September 2020, as BCA's headquarters 1 Windrush Square, re-opened to the public in between lockdowns, BCA was asked if it could host a meeting of the new Commission for Race and Ethnic Disparities. BCA was not invited to give evidence at this meeting but given that the topic was in line with our mission, we provided a covid-safe venue. The Commissioners did not ask to use or view the reference library or archives at BCA which include:

- Black mental health collections
- Black British activism collections
- The archives and library of the Runnymede Trust
- Oral histories of people of African and of African Caribbean descent, including their experiences of inequality.

Also, in September 2020, BCA's Managing Director Arike Oke received a letter giving her two days' notice to attend a virtual roundtable on Black History at Downing Street. The event was set to be 'A discussion on how the nation can learn more about the role black and



minority ethnic communities have played in shaping Britain outside of the school curriculum.’ This was the discussion attended by the historian, Stephen Bourne, and at which BCA presented a case on the ways in which teaching and learning about Black history could be made available to all. This is one of the key aims of BCA’s 2030 strategy.

At this meeting the other attendees were the Commissioners of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report that was published by the government on 31st March 2021. BCA was not briefed for this meeting and is not recorded in the report. BCA recognises that others who were named in the report as contributors (including the Regius Professor of Medicine at the University of Oxford, Sir John Bell) did not contribute to the report, and that the list of new research commissioned by the report does not appear to be accurate [\[iii\]](#) [\[iii\]](#).

The BCA staff and board of trustees read the report when it was publicly released. BCA’s findings are as follows:

Minimisation of historical context

The report minimises the historical context of both the lived experience of racism and the documented evidence of institutional racism.

The report celebrates the London 2012 Olympics opening ceremony as inclusively telling the story of Britain. The report continually refers to ‘50 years ago’ throughout its pages. BCA assumes the Commissioners are using the 1971 Immigration Act as the starting point for their 50 years benchmarking. The reason for using 50 years as a benchmark of progress is unclear; the Windrush period began over 70 years ago with the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush in 1948, the landmark Race Relations Act was 56 years ago, ‘race riots’ in the modern period were occurring from 1919 at least, and people of African descent have been present in the British Isles for over 2000 years. As the report does not include a longitudinal analysis of the 50 years it references, the progress the report refers to can only be considered as anecdotal or the Commissioners’ personal non-evidence-based opinions.

The report argues against the application of the term ‘institutional racism’ in all but the most egregious of situations [\[iv\]](#), while in the same text agreeing with the McPherson report definition. The McPherson definition as quoted in the report understands that racism can include ‘unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping’ [\[v\]](#). This is an example of the report’s confused approach. The report’s position on institutional racism is a logic cul de sac which obscures and destroys its own argument.

Minimisation of the importance of independent research

The report minimises the importance of independent research and the numerous reviews and commissions that predate it.

The report relies on a small set of commissioned research, using citations for statistics but no citations for the sweeping statements and assertions made in the report. A statement such as, ‘There is a sense of stagnation about the fate and life chances of poorer White groups, which is less the case with ethnic minority groups.’, is not qualified by evidence or reasoning. It occurs in the same paragraph in which the report references statistics on ‘poor



ethnic minorities [...] improving rapidly'[\[vi\]](#), which in itself is at odds with the data referenced which shows that children of African Caribbean descent perform well in early years before attainment declines rapidly as they move through the school system[\[vii\]](#). Much research has been done, and is ongoing, into the attainment of African Caribbean ethnicity children and young people, including by the Chair of the Commission itself[\[viii\]](#). That wider body of research is not referenced in the report, nor seemingly by the Commissioners.

Minimisation of the ongoing effects of the transatlantic trade

The report minimises both the ongoing effects of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, and the resilience and resistance of enslaved people.

The report is hampered by a lack of proof-reading. BCA is not able to penetrate the grammar of the sentence, 'There is a new story about the Caribbean experience which speaks to the slave period not only being about profit and suffering but how culturally African people transformed themselves into a re-modelled African/Britain'[\[ix\]](#). If the intention is to suggest that the centuries of enslavement and human trafficking of Africans was culturally beneficial to either the people of the continent of Africa or to the people transported to the Caribbean, BCA's refutation of this concept is absolute.

The report makes assertions that research into what it calls the 'slave period' increases a victim narrative. On the contrary, the study of the transatlantic slave trade has countered the narrative of the enslaved people as victims. Recently, Stella Dadzie's book, *A Kick in the Belly* (Virago, 2020), gave evidence of reproductive resistance among enslaved women. The refusal to replenish the stock of enslaved people via this type of resistance contributed to the decline of the economic viability of the transatlantic slave trade.

To teach and learn about the transatlantic slave trade is not to teach and learn about 'suffering and profit', nor is it to promote jingoistic narratives of cultural imperialism. It allows society to better understand its own development, to combat racism and to promote social justice [\[x\]](#).

Ignoring work done to create curriculum resources & minimising teachers' calls for support.

The report recommends a 'Making of Modern Britain' curriculum resource [\[xi\]](#), ignoring the work that has already been done to create curriculum resources and minimising the calls from teachers for support to develop a discursive and diverse teaching practice across the curriculum.

BCA is one of several charities and other bodies that have been calling for a change in the curriculum for decades. BCA and other bodies including Runnymede Trust, the Windrush Foundation, and the Black Curriculum among others have all produced resources for teachers to support including the inclusion of Black history, the history of Empire and the history of migration to Britain in the classroom[\[xii\]](#) [\[xiii\]](#) [\[xiv\]](#) [\[xv\]](#).

BCA agrees with the report that, 'We heard that many schools and teachers do not have the knowledge or confidence to teach the kind of history suitable for a multi-ethnic UK and need



additional support to do so.^[xvii] It is disappointing then that no more space is given to highlighting the many existing resources in the report, nor that the recommendation goes further than to suggest appointing a panel of experts to produce even more resources. The teaching community's call for support is not necessarily a call for resources. BCA and other cultural institutions, including the Imperial War Museum, have begun to address teachers' needs via training and continuous professional development well as by creating and refining existing resources^[xviii].

Minimising the findings of the Wendy Williams report

In minimising the findings of the Wendy Williams report into the Windrush Scandal, the report undermines the work of the Cross-Government Windrush Working Group.

The report includes two passing references to the Windrush Scandal^[xix]. The March 2020 Wendy Williams report identifies and uses evidence to identify clear links between institutional ignorance and the forced illegal deportation of British citizens. The Wendy Williams report draws links between ethnicity and poor treatment. The Commission included members of the Government's Cross-Government Windrush Working Group. It is unclear why the scandal is not used or examined as evidence in the Commission's study, when the Wendy Williams investigation and report contains so much of relevance to the Commission's given brief, and to the conclusions that they draw on the existence or otherwise of institutional or systemic bias.

Narrow focus on socio-economic inequality

The report recognises that multiple factors create inequality, beyond race and ethnicity. In discovering this the Commissioners choose only to focus on socio-economic inequality, rather than other intersections such as gender identity, sexuality, or the effects of ableism.

The aim of the Commission was to examine the effects and mitigations for inequalities arising from ethnicity discrimination. It was to look across areas 'including poverty, education, employment, health and the criminal justice system'^[xx].

The report finds that there is more than ethnicity that drives disparities. That there are intersections of discrimination and disadvantage. The report looks at two intersections: race and socio-economic status. Despite other intersections, or factors, that drive inequality (ableism, sexism, religious intolerance etc.) the report gives socioeconomic status significance that over-rides all other factors^[xxi].

The report does not attempt to address other factors that give rise to disparities and seed inequality. In this omission the report fails to look across evidence equally, even stating in the Chair's foreword that 'anti-muslim and antisemitism are outside the scope of this report'^[xxii]. The same reasoning that precludes these other factors in disparity from the report should also preclude socioeconomic factors. The report strays from its brief to examine race and ethnic disparities. While picking out and isolating data that supports its central theory on socioeconomic status, the report ignores and discards data, sometimes from the same sources, that disproves its theory^[xxiii].



The report's findings entrench racial and ethnic disparities by dismissing the significance of race and ethnicity in the experience of people who do not have access to the mitigations of privilege.

Commissioners' failure to recognise their own unconscious bias.

The report recognises that all people have biases that they are not aware of, or unconscious bias, yet the Commissioners fail to recognise their own.

The report states that previous inquiries into racial inequalities have focused on a binary 'BAME vs White Britain'[\[xxiv\]](#). Despite this recognition, and the recommendation to disaggregate BAME, the report focuses the main part of its discourse on the experiences of 'White British working class'[\[xxv\]](#) people and Black people (especially those of African Caribbean descent). Data is presented for people of African descent, minority White ethnicities, Asian ethnicities and Chinese ethnicities, but it is not analysed beyond being used as evidence to support the report's conclusions on outcomes for White British working-class people and African Caribbean people[\[xxvi\]](#). The examples given in the report of the Making Modern Britain resource do not include recognition of the effect of colonisation of Africa, the Partition of India, the links between British colonialism and the war in Afghanistan, the Troubles, or radicalisation and the conflict with ISIS. There appears then to be a bias towards a binary of White British and Black African Caribbean in the report, even taking into account the difficult reframing of transatlantic slave trade history as 'the Caribbean experience'[\[xxvii\]](#).

Other critics of the report

BCA's findings above echo the findings of other professional bodies and organisations. BCA recognises and supports other organisations' reservations on the report's analysis and findings on:

- Health outcomes, in which the growing body of peer reviewed research in ethnicity-linked health inequalities is not used. The conclusions drawn by the Commissioners are superficial.[\[xxviii\]](#)
- Employment and opportunities, in which the report suggests imposing an additional administration load for firms which choose to review ethnicity pay gaps[\[xxix\]](#). The report also misses the opportunity to address discrimination in recruitment practices in its recommendations. BCA has recently begun a holistic cultural sector workforce diversity programme which aims to support people throughout their careers from school to becoming board members.[\[xxx\]](#) [\[xxxi\]](#)
- School exclusions, which have risen for Black children since the pandemic.[\[xxxii\]](#)
- Children and childhood. Children in care are not given any space in this report. The report recommends that another review is undertaken for children at risk without noting the ongoing existing review work and campaigning for children.[\[xxxiii\]](#)



- East Asian and South East Asian ethnic minorities, of whom only people of Chinese descent have been included in the report.[\[xxxiv\]](#)

Conclusion

BCA recognises the work commissioned by the Stuart Hall Foundation in its parallel Race Report, which collated and examined the preceding thirteen race and equality reports between 1981 and 2018, noting that of the 589 different recommendations in those reports very few have been taken up.

The chosen narrative of the Commission's March 2021 report, its selective and confused approach to data collection and analysis, and its inconclusive findings undermines its own recommendations.

BCA will include the report in the library collections at 1 Windrush Square, but we still await action for positive change for all individuals, communities and wider society. This report is not it.

[\[i\] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/windrush-lessons-learned-review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/windrush-lessons-learned-review)

[\[ii\] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/01/experts-cited-in-no-10s-race-report-claim-they-were-not-properly-consulted](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/01/experts-cited-in-no-10s-race-report-claim-they-were-not-properly-consulted)

[\[iii\] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/04/01/experts-thanked-controversial-race-report-say-werent-consulted/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/04/01/experts-thanked-controversial-race-report-say-werent-consulted/)

[\[iv\]](#) p.8 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report (2021)

[\[v\]](#) p.34

[\[vi\]](#) p.38

[\[vii\]](#) ps.57-59

[\[viii\]](#) Black Masculinities and Schooling: How Black Boys Survive Modern Schooling, Tony Sewell, Trentham Books: 1997. This work is referenced in the report in a passage on gang membership.

[\[ix\]](#) p.8 CRED report

[\[x\] https://www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/788/resource/2811/teaching-slavery](https://www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/788/resource/2811/teaching-slavery)

[\[xi\]](#) Recommendation 20, the CRED report

[\[xii\]](#) Runnymede Trust: <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/>

[\[xiii\]](#) Windrush Foundation: <https://windrushfoundation.com/70-windrush-pioneers-and-champions-empire-windrush-education-resource1/>

[\[xiv\]](#) The Black Curriculum: <https://theblackcurriculum.com/freelearning>

[\[xv\]](#) BCA resource example: <https://blackculturalarchives.org/learning/schools-programme>

[\[xvi\]](#) p.92 CRED report

[\[xvii\] https://blackculturalarchives.org/learning/schools-programme](https://blackculturalarchives.org/learning/schools-programme)

[\[xviii\]](#) p.27 and p.234 of the CRED report [\[xix\]](#) <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/Commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities/about>

[\[xx\]](#) The report uses the terminology of class: 'middle class', 'working class' etc. The section 'Geography, class and ethnicity' details the position of the report. p.37 – 39.

[\[xxi\]](#) p.6

[\[xxii\] https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/sewell-report-response-what-does-data-really-tell-us](https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/sewell-report-response-what-does-data-really-tell-us)

[\[xxiii\] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/07/sewell-report-structural-racism-research](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/07/sewell-report-structural-racism-research)

[\[xxiv\]](#) p.233, the CRED report

[\[xxv\]](#) p.69

[\[xxvi\]](#) The report uses 'Black Caribbean' interchangeably for 'African Caribbean'. There are 475 uses of 'white'; 467 uses of 'black'; 179 uses of 'Asian'; 52 uses of 'Chinese'.

[\[xxvii\]](#) p.8

[\[xxviii\] https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/03/31/structural-racism-is-a-fundamental-cause-and-driver-of-ethnic-disparities-in-health/](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/03/31/structural-racism-is-a-fundamental-cause-and-driver-of-ethnic-disparities-in-health/) ; <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-response-race-ethnic-disparities-report> ; <https://www.csp.org.uk/news/2021-04-01-csp-reaction-report-Commission-race-ethnic->



disparities <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/news/race-disparity-Commission-report-falls-far-short-mental-health>

[xxix] Recommendation 9, the CRED report.

[xxx] <https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/310321commission-race-ethnic-disparities#gref>

[xxxi] <https://feweeek.co.uk/2021/04/03/race-report-avoids-tackling-systematic-discrimination-in-apprentice-recruitment/>

[xxxii] <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/race-report-vindicates-disproportionate-exclusions-of-black-children-critics-say>

[xxxiii] https://twitter.com/article_39/status/1377225197288366088?s=20

[xxxiv] <https://esas.squarespace.com/s/Joint-Response-by-ESEA-community-groups-to-the-Report-by-the-Commission-on-Race-and-Ethnic-Dispariti.pdf>