

DOROTHY KUYA ARCHIVE BLOG: AN INTRODUCTION

By Janaya Pickett, Vicki Caren and Dateus Tagoe



Janaya Pickett – Project Manager

Welcome to the first edition of the Dorothy Kuya Creative Heritage Project blog! My name is Janaya Pickett and I am the project manager. In this blog series the project team (Archivist Vicki Caren, Project Assistant Dateus Tagoe and our wonderful participants) will be sharing information about this incredible figure who dedicated the majority of her life to the fight for social justice as a Black, scouse, female, Communist agitator!

Writing on the Wall's Creative Heritage Projects aim to give communities access to forgotten histories, through a unique and modern archival practice. This approach not only allows individuals from marginalised backgrounds to catalogue archive collections relevant to social justice, but to engage with an archive creatively through writing, visual art, film, theatre and more. In this approach we readdress historical narratives used to justify systemic oppression of marginalised peoples – narratives that still hold credence in the present day.

It is the huge success of WoW's other CHP's (such as the George Garrett and Great War to Race Riots Project) that led to National Museums Liverpool approaching us with this special commission. Our project will run until July and include weekly community archive workshops, a blog, podcast, an artistic response by a creative in residence and live events to be announced later in the Spring.

As a Black scouse woman and 5th generation Black Brit, this project for me feels extremely relevant. As someone born in the 1980s, Black British history (let alone Black Liverpool history) was never something I was taught. Knowledge of Black Liverpool came much later when I was old and wise enough to seek

it out. I was aware of Dorothy Kuya as an elder 'legend' in the Liverpool 8 community with a history of activism. But Liverpool's Black community has always brimmed with political activism and to me she was simply one of many. Since October, working with the team on sorting through the 45 crates of Dorothy's personal papers, I am completely overwhelmed and inspired by the breadth of not only Black Liverpool history, but Black UK history, covered through her specific lens; A Black woman born in 1930s Liverpool during the Great Depression; A dedicated communist since her teens; A staunch anti-imperialist; A British born Black woman who from the 1940s up until her passing in 2013 stood fiercely opposed to racism, sexism and Western imperialism.



Dorothy Kuya - 1970's

The list of causes Dorothy was involved in throughout her life is extensive, and since learning more about her, I eagerly share her story with anyone who will listen. The most common response, from the wider (and especially whiter) local populous, is to ask "*why haven't I heard of her before*"?

The timing of this archive project seems fated, in that many of the causes Dorothy dedicated herself to are still pertinent some fifty years later: the

Teachers Against Racism organisation she helped found in the early 1970s and the Dragon's Teeth project which examined racial bias in children's education and schoolbooks.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and murder of George Floyd in 2020, discussions around representation and perceptions of Black lives, as well the effects institutional racism has on those lives, have moved to the forefront of the zeitgeist.

Dorothy's lifelong fight against inequality is also relevant in the face of modern Tory austerity, the cost-of-living crisis and privatisation of the NHS. The gap between rich and poor continues to widen into the 21st century, and a large part of Dorothy's archive examines the history of these divides based on race, class, and gender. I believe her total dedication to 'people power' is the inspiration that we working-class individuals will so desperately need in the years to come, and hope to share that inspiration with as many people as possible.



Dorothy Kuya (centre right) with Paul Robeson (centre left).

Vick Caren – Project Archivist

I am the Project Archivist working with the incredible Dorothy Kuya archive collection.

I had a career change and graduated from the Master of Archives and Records Management course in Liverpool in 2013 and have been working on short term archive projects ever since. The archive job market is competitive, and it has always been in the back of my mind that I may need to move away for the right job, but I stubbornly want to stay in Liverpool. I want to work with collections relating to the rich heritage of the city that my grandparents moved to and made home.

I am interested in the history of Liverpool and the different communities that make it a city like no other. I have worked and volunteered on different projects to fill the gaps in my formal education and knowledge, from WWI to maritime history, Irish immigration to post war popular culture.

In 2014 I volunteered with Writing on the Wall's creative heritage project 'Great War to Race Riots'. I was there to learn more about the contribution of the Black community, something I had read very little about. I was part of an incredible team of volunteers from all ages and backgrounds. The taught course provided us with the social and political context, not just here in Liverpool, but nationally and internationally. More than that it inspired us as a group to read, discuss, listen, and learn from what we had uncovered in our research. This experience helped the group with the archival process, understanding the primary documents from the collection and writing descriptions for the catalogue.

We each had strengths and skills to share with the group, which was empowering, and motivated us to want to do more together to communicate this hidden history of Liverpool. The energy fuelled a range of creative responses, events, exhibitions, and our hugely popular walking tour. In my experience the creative heritage model is a powerful way of bringing people from diverse backgrounds together to work on a common cause – does this sound like a form of activism? Maybe it is!

I think the material in Dorothy Kuya's archive shows her thirst for knowledge, from a library of books and publications to correspondence with organisations around the world. The scale of her interests, campaigning and employment is breath-taking.

When I started listing the material in the boxes and crates, I began a timeline document to note what Dorothy was involved with and when. This is something I am constantly referring to, adding to and wondering how she managed to fit so much activity into her life.

Dorothy was involved with a range of women's organisations including the National Assembly of Women and the Women's International Democratic Federation. Both gave her the opportunity to travel and to speak at conferences on issues relating to race and equality. This also enabled Dorothy to connect with like-minded women, to campaign and work together to achieve lasting change, not just locally, but nationally too.

The archive is a rich source of information of one woman's tireless struggles in race, education, politics, women's issues, social justice, housing and African history. It is also frighteningly relevant to today's society. When the archive has been catalogued and repackaged it will be a publicly accessible resource, one that I hope is used by students, academics, researchers, creatives and anyone interested in equality and making a positive change to their community, to wider society.



Archive Assistant Dateus Tagoe working on the collection with participants.

Dateus Tagoe – Archive Assistant

I am the Archive Assistant for the Dorothy Kuya archive project. As a Black British man, this project is extremely relevant to someone born in the 1990's who has experienced the results of my predecessors struggles. Although I have always loved learning history, the kind of history I was mostly taught throughout my education was not relevant to my experience (or at times, accurate!). So, I set out to learn about black history with help from my family; it was them who encouraged me to study history, with my specialty being African History and the rise of anti-colonialism in the 20th century. My Grandad, who was an active member of the Liverpool 8 community and worked at the Liverpool 8 Law Centre, always mentioned Dorothy Kuya but I unfortunately never got to meet her in person.

I got my start with WoW in 2022 thanks to a chance meeting with Maria O'Riley, who told me about a job opening they had for an Archive Assistant on the L8 Archive project. At the time I was finishing my history degree at Liverpool John Moores University and looking to start my career in the heritage industry. After looking at WoW's past projects and work with the community, I knew this was the place for me to get my start and gain new skills that would help me achieve my goals.

The role itself was completely unique, as WoW accessed funds from Archives Revealed to be able to create the role. Through working in partnership with Liverpool Central Library on the project, I was able to learn various skills crucial to working in the heritage industry including archiving, conservation, marketing and project management. After the success of the L8 Archive project, National Museums Liverpool approached WoW with the opportunity to work on the Dorothy Kuya Project, as they saw the ground-breaking work we were doing with archive collections.

I was able to learn about a woman that had made such an impact on the lives of different people not just in education, but in many fields. Seeing Dorothy as the first community relations officer in Liverpool and in senior positions at national organisations was inspiring to see and I'm excited to share what I've found with as many people as possible!

I am particularly interested in sharing Dorothy's work with the Teachers Against Racism, which was set up to address racial bias in children's books and the British school system and was unheard of at the time. She also created her own organisation, Affirmata, that delivered race relations training across the country.

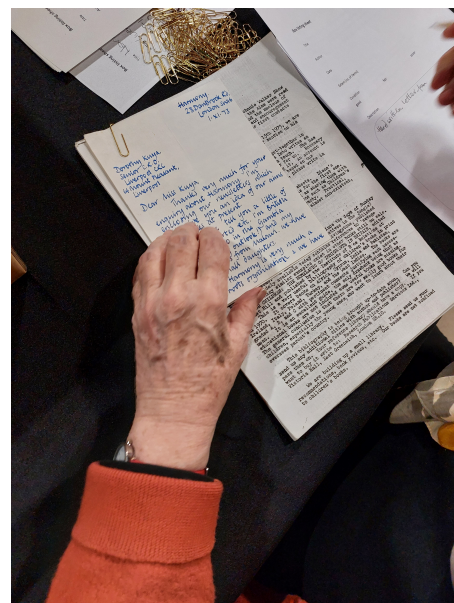
Our community archive workshops take place every Thursday evening at the Anthony Walker Education Centre, situated in the International Slavery Museum on the Royal Albert Dock. The workshops are completely free to join, offering a chance to gain new knowledge, skills, and an opportunity to contribute to the preservation of a very important archive for Liverpool's history. So far, we have welcomed a talented group of individuals, of varying ages, from diverse backgrounds and there are still spaces available.

For more information on how to get involved in the Dorothy Kuya Creative Heritage Project, contact janaya@writingonthewall.org.uk.



WoW's Dorothy Kuya Archive Team
Vicki, Dateus and Janaya (left to right)

The thing I'm looking forward to the most on the project is being able to look at the finished catalogue. There are many achievements Dorothy experienced throughout her lifetime that I feel have not been highlighted enough. The fact that she helped established the slavery remembrance walks and eventually the International Slavery Museum is not talked about enough. By the end of this project, hopefully that will change with the Maritime and National Museum Liverpool both helping to spread the word of the Dorothy Kuya Archive.



Project participant reviewing archive material