**How should Reading recognise its connections to the history of people of African descent?**

**Rationale for enquiry**

In discourse on slave-ownership and the impact that it had on Britain, many people assume or believe that the impact of the trade is only significantly centred around port cities that saw a direct connection to the slave trade. This enquiry aims to give students an understanding that slave-ownership has left a significant legacy in Britain, by looking at the history of the connections to slave-ownership of a place not normally associated with that legacy. It is well documented in London, Bristol and Liverpool particularly, but it is the typicality of Reading and the fact that it would never have been assumed to have these connections that demonstrate the legacy of slave-ownership in Britain; if Reading has this history, then everywhere does.

Reading does have a prominent Black history mural, right in the centre of the town. It is on the side of a building that used to be a community centre for the local British-Caribbean community. Most people who live in Reading know the mural, but many do not know much about it. The mural serves as the stimulus for looking at an unfamiliar aspect of Reading’s history – asking about why people care so much about the protection of the mural and why it is something that Reading as a whole should care about, and not just people of African descent. This sets students up for then looking at the history of people of African descent in Reading, a history that is inextricably linked to the history of British slave-ownership but carries on long after 1833.

Much of the thinking behind this enquiry has come from reading of David Olusoga’s *Black and British: a forgotten history* (2017) and Akala’s *Natives, Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (2019). Both writers are clear that the history of the slave trade, slave-ownership and the abolition of slavery has been mis-told, mis-remembered or ignored, and that the way in which Britain remembers this history is not accurate and allows the idea that Black people are not as British as white people. This forgetting of the past has a significant impact on ideas about identity, on racism and on the shaping the history curriculum taught in schools. Emma Waterton (in ‘Humiliated silence: multiculturalism, blame and the trope of “moving on”’, 2010, p. 129) argues that forgetting this history is harmful, that public memory in the way in which the abolition is currently commemorated masks ‘insidious processes of collective amnesia and national forgetting, through which oppressive power relations are subtly sustained and reinforced’. This enquiry is an effort to help students to understand that the presence of Black people in Reading is not ‘new’, and it should be a step towards creating a more culturally relevant curriculum. With the increasing focus on the content of the curriculum taught, and with teachers considering the reasons why we teach topics in history, it is hoped that history teachers, already well engaged with this type of thinking, might consider the relevance of their curriculum to all their students. Teachers grapple with the choices that they make in their topics, considering the content and skills and what students need as foundational knowledge for future studies, but we should also be considering how culturally relevant our curriculum is to our students. As Kay Traille (2007, p. 36) argues, ‘there is the need to put more effort into getting children of African-Caribbean descent to see the importance of the discipline in answering their questions’. It is also important that students who are not of African-Caribbean descent see that this history exists – that it is part of British history and the history of the specific place in which they live. Traille is clear that there is a real negative impact when students only ever see their ‘own’ history, when it is the history of ‘enslaved people at the mercy of others’. By teaching this enquiry, students might see that the legacy of slave-ownership is part of British and Reading’s history, and did not stop when slavery ended. This meets Traille’s advice that, in teaching the transatlantic slave trade, we teach it as ‘a major phenomenon in human history’ and that African Caribbean history ‘continues long after’ the Middle Passage (p. 36).

The outcome of this enquiry is a museum display for Reading Museum that recognises the history thath the students have learned about. The whole enquiry asks about *how* we should recognise this history and establishes with the students that this history is not already recognised enough or in an accurate way. Olivette Otele (in ‘Bristol, slavery and the politics of representation: the Slave Trade Gallery in the Bristol Museum’, 2012, p. 157) writes that ‘museums are cultural sites where history is staged through displays’, and considers the importance of museums as part of a cultural process – and a shared culture is part of how we create a sense of belonging. However, minority groups are less likely to visit museums – perhaps this is hardly surprising when the history of minority groups is often not represented. In Reading Museum, in the ‘Story of Reading’ exhibition, there are only two references to people of African descent, and they are fairly fleeting mentions on panels at the back of displays (photos in Lesson 6). This reflects the way in which Britain has treated this history more broadly. The enquiry attempts to redress this previous forgetting and bring this to the fore with students. Students studying this enquiry will not just learn about Reading’s connections to slave-ownership and the history of people of African descent, but also build important knowledge about the nature of public history and commemoration, and the contentious nature of how Britain has celebrated abolition but not fully recognised and acknowledged slave-ownership.

**References**

Akala (2012) *Natives, Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire,* London: Two Roads

Olusoga, D. (2017) *Black and British: a forgotten history*, London: Pan Macmillan

Otele, O. (2012) ‘Bristol, slavery and the politics of representation: the Slave Trade Gallery in the Bristol Museum’in *Social Semiotics*, *22*, no. 2, pp. 155–172

Traille, T. (2007) ‘“You should be proud about your history. They made me feel ashamed”; teaching history hurts’in *Teaching History*, *127*, *Sense and Sensitivity Edition*, pp. 31–37.

Waterton, E. (2010) ‘Humiliated silence: multiculturalism, blame and the trop of “moving on”’ in *Museum and Society*, *8*, no. 3, pp. 128–157