



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships: CDP4

Call for HEI Partners/Academic Supervisors

‘Convinced ambassadors of Empire’?: exploring the visual record of Black Caribbean men and women serving in the UK during the Second World War

IWM co-supervisor: James Taylor, Principal Curator, Public History

Context and summary

This proposal is for a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership PhD which will focus on the records in photographs and film held by Imperial War Museums (IWM) of Black volunteers from the Caribbean in the UK during the Second World War. It will open up new perspectives and information on this largely unexplored collection by looking at how and why these images and footage were commissioned, the subjects chosen, the intended audiences and messages. It will also investigate how they have been used more recently in developing understanding and making memory.

During the Second World War, 10,000 Black men and women from the Caribbean served in the UK - in the armed forces, industry, forestry or the Merchant Navy. The majority of these volunteers responded to British recruitment drives in the Caribbean, while some, particularly early in the war, made their own way to Britain to join the fight. Although the Colour Bar had been officially lifted in 1939, many of them would experience discrimination during the recruitment process or in the course of their service.

The experiences of these people varied across the different areas where they contributed to the war effort. Many Caribbean volunteers served in the Royal Air Force, whereas the Army proved far less receptive to Black men and women serving in its ranks. Those involved in industry and agriculture experienced racial discrimination from employers, trade unions and government officials. Although the Colonial Office was keen to encourage recruitment of Caribbean men and women, it was mostly an exercise in public relations and an attempt to quell any dissent to ensure that those who served in Britain would return home ‘convinced Ambassadors of Empire’.

The PhD project will focus on the visual record – photographs and film – held in IWM’s collection showing Black volunteers from the Caribbean in the UK. That record was commissioned largely (though not exclusively) by government departments, including the Colonial Office, the Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Supply, or by branches of the armed forces. It formed part of a wider propaganda campaign that showed Britain’s empire pulling together in a joint struggle, overlooking differences of race and ethnicity.

Our understanding of this material is, however, very limited. There is clearly much to uncover and more nuanced stories to tell. This CDP PhD will ensure that we can address this issue and bring IWM collections into critical dialogue with other national and international collections (official and unofficial), perspectives and knowledge bases external to IWM. By way of wider context, the PhD student might also look at the official visual record of volunteers serving in the Caribbean itself, as well as in other parts of the world.

Key research questions to be addressed include:

- How and why were the photographs and film commissioned and circulated?
- What subjects did the photographers and film-makers choose and how were those subjects represented?
- Who were the intended and actual audiences?
- Where do the tensions lie between the official narrative and the actual experience of Black men and women from the Caribbean serving in the UK
- How have histories been obscured or excluded through the colonial context in which they were produced?
- How has this visual record shaped meaning making for families and communities today?
- How have these images and film been used more widely, in museums, and in education (including at IWM)?

In addition to research at IWM, the student will be expected to engage with sources held at such archives as:

- The UK National Archives
- Black Cultural Archives
- University of the West Indies
- Royal Air Force Museum
- National Army Museum
- Royal Museums Greenwich

Based on the scope of intended research the PhD supervisor would work with the candidate on access to other archives at universities or other Institutions.

Application forms and guidelines are available to download from our website:

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/research/doctoral-awards>

The application form provides an opportunity to develop the academic co-supervisor's own approach to the topic. The deadline for completed applications is **5pm on Wednesday 4 December 2024**.

For queries on the research theme please contact James Taylor jtaylor@iwm.org.uk

If you have any queries about the competition process, please contact Daisy Urquhart, Research and Knowledge Exchange Officer, Research@iwm.org.uk