Seventeen
of Sixty Eight

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Hidden in a Public Place

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Foreword

Ingrid Pollard was an AHRC Research Fellow in the Department of Arts, Media and English, in the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences at London South Bank University between 2002 and 2005. Her time with the university was highly productive and Ingrid made an important contribution to the department during a major period of development in teaching and research.

Ingrid was part of many of our activities, teaching on the BA hons Digital Photography, attending regular departmental meetings and participating in the research seminar program. It was good for us to have someone who could cast a supportive but critical eye upon institutional life, who asked awkward questions about why things had to be the way they were. I was not sure she was ever convinced by the institutional answers. It was also good for students to be taught by someone with so much experience of maintaining a professional life as an artist and who knew how hard it was to do that.

The institutional context became the focus of an ongoing strand of conversations between Ingrid, myself and other colleagues, centured upon the relationship between two very different practices of intellectual and creative work. The question became, how was an art practice to be understood within the social sciences and could it be supported? The discussion that ensued from this question, was for my part, extremely fruitful in helping me to clarify many of the problems connected with research methodologies for practice based research. It remains important to question why the paradigms of scientific knowledge, albeit a progressive and open model formed the bedrock for the AHRC Fellowship Scheme for creative practitioners. One of the most useful consequences of this questioning has been the articulation and initial theorisation of paradigms of research methodologies.
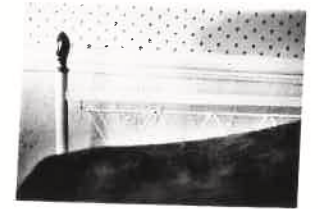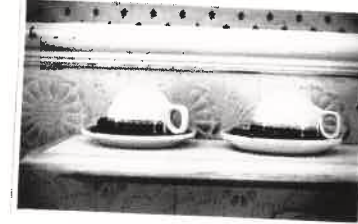
Finally here something should be said about the subject of Ingrid's research. The faculty has a long and established interest in questions of 'racialisation' and in the study of migration and in particular the African Caribbean diaspora.

Most of this work has been in mainstream sociology and has taken the form of looking at social patterns of post war British settlement and more recently return migration. The underlying issues for sociology at LSBU has been that of understanding and problematising racialised, social and cultural life. In this context Ingrid Pollard's research, "Hidden in a Public Place" has been highly relevant and the tentative conclusions reached in this report support the view that we should remember that histories need continually to be uncovered and stories need to be told and that much of these are contained within our visual culture.

Professor Andrew Dewdney April 2008.

Introduction

Q. Where did your interest in the historical representation of black people develop from? *

The starting point for the research lies in the iconography of specific public house signs in the UK. It is not readily understood that whilst the name of a public house may have a long history, its sign has a short life span, due to the climatic conditions affecting the sign. So the signs are continually culturally recast through their repainting and reworking.

My working hypothesis is that public house signs function within social spaces. The specific and localised geographical, economic and cultural histories. Each individual sign is both an example within a popular genre, a unique sign and marker of location. The examine of the history and aesthetics of particular individual pub signs can under stood in their wider context.

The examination of the signs can mean, for example, looking at the history and current existence and different forms of Black Boy, Black-a-Moors Head, Blacks Head and the connections and contrast to the Arab Boy, Saracens Head and Labour in Vain. It is my contention that pub signs can be used to tease out hidden histories and heritage stories. My initial research endeavor will be in part, to re-cover or dredge-up hidden histories that may be connected to wider histories of a black presence in Britain and English history. In doing this I will necessarily widen the scope of the research to look at the representation of the black subject in 19th and 20th century visual imagery. This would include fine art, photography, print media and advertising in British and European collections. This would be through a selective process of comparison and cross-referencing.

* the questions throughout this report are taken from the AHRC application.

Research Questions

☐ How does a visual sign act as a marker of identification and belonging for a local population?

☐ How does the sign exist as a marker of commerce, and an advertisement for the leisure industry?

☐ How do these signs evolve aesthetically or pictorially through political and demographic change, or in many cases being erased completely over time?

☐ How, in turn, do these small changes make visible the bigger changes in national and cultural identity?

☐ How does a sign existing in everyday life, often passed over,(ignored?) become visible again through recontextualisation as research?

☐ What relationships can be made between the contemporary public house sign and wider representations of the black subject in popular culture?

Research Methods

The research questions will be addressed through a variety of research methods drawn from the academic disciplines of photographic theories & histories and contemporary art practices. Furthering my understanding of the relationship between theory and practice as research methodologies. An central aspect of my working methods have been through the use of libraries and archival . These become sources for ephemeral and historical indicators.For example, I have used the British Library, including the Heal Collection of shop signs. The Association of Brewers and Victualers the London Guildhall collection of shop & pub signs and tavern tokens. I understood that inns and taverns were sites of radical political discussions and dissemination of independent publications.

The archives, historical documents and exhibits of the Whitbread Brewery Company were, he Association of Inn Signs Painters and the Inn Sign Society were invaluable for their documentation of pub signs and associated trade signs.

Q. How did you conceive of the research taking place?

A. My artistic practice since the early 1980's has explored landscape, popular cultural notions of identity and 'Britishness' through genres of documentary, landscape and portrait photography. I have made work that explores the relationship between race, ethnicity and public space. In the present work I am interested in examining common-sense notions and stereotypical ideas of a diverse groups and places. To question the selective positioning and narratives of those relegated to the margins, the liminal spaces, in opposition to those who appear to occupy a central place. In practice this has taken the investigation of forms of popular culture such as postcards, photo-albums and documentary films. Additionally using quasi-scientific forms of inquiry: mapping; geology, anthropological and scientific systems, for example as modes of presentation. I have reflected on the part that photography has played as part of these systems, with their unique form of reality and truth.

The research for The Spectre of the Black Boy project came from a range of research sources, combining media forms; text and images and travel photography in relation to examinations of historical documents and artifacts. Since seeing and recording of my first pub sign, my prime question has been; are there any other pubs named the black boy?

Hidden in a Public Place

Research Context

Before looking at the details of research research findings, I want to indicate how I translated a longstanding artistic practice into the language and thinking of academic research and what is now termed practice-based research.

As I have revealed my artistic practice has evolved in a close relationship to wider sources of visual culture and draws upon a range of cultural practices. When I started to formulate the research project within the guidelines of the AHRC, I came up against a new problem.

The issue was that the model of practice-based research I encountered was based upon a social scientific methodology. This meant that my more dispersed, almost 'chaotic' visual methodologies of making work had to be marshaled into a systematic and what felt to me regimented mode of thought. In a sense it took me away from visual research and into the sociological imagination. This tension opened up an new avenue of thinking about the social context of the image. For example the anthropology of African story telling, how it could be related to the representation of the African in Western European graphic illustration in children's books and toys. Additionally the sociological perspective also felt at many points like a closing-down of the process of responding to diverse ideas in the making of new images. Needless to say this tension remains unresolved for me in practice-based research.

The research of the Black Boy pubs involved photo-documentation involving many journeys around Britain as well as archival research. Overall the research was structured by the original research questions, which remain ongoing. This chapter is organised around the five key questions of history, locality, commerce, pictorial representation and popular culture.

How does a visual sign act as a marker of identification and belonging for a local population?

My interest in this question rose from curiosity about the regular visitors to the pub. I mean people for whom the local pub was part of their everyday life. A place where drinking and socialising are part of their regular activity. I wanted to know what their understanding of the sign be. Typically this would have been a white, working class population, drinking in a place whose name and sign that makes reference to black people, or to the exotic other. Had the sign had become familiar or had simply melted into their familiar world. What I wanted to know if I prompted them to consider their relationship to the sign what would they say. What I found was that often the sign represented to them a real historical figure around which stories had been woven. The following example is a good demonstration of this from a BBC radio program, by the local drinkers at an Oxford pub.

'My grandfather who had been coming to this pub since he was a small boy, probably about 100 years. He used to take me rat catching, when we went out for a walk round the fields and we'd pop in the black boy pub for a drink on the way back'.....

Q. what did your grandfather say about the sign.

'Well he told me and this may be a story, there was black footman in the area in the 18th century and this was the place he liked to come for a glass of beer. I imagined where he was on duty he had a powered wig and a formal suit with gold lace. When he was off duty, like other servants he would have a dark suit of clothes and knee britches probably buckled shoes, but that my picture of him'....

It is interesting that the story in this case has been passed across generations, linking family histories. The interviewee was a local military man from Sandhurst and his attention to detail of dress belie the attention to the detail of military uniforms. I saw this account and the story it contains as a benign and progressive inclusion of the black other into local and autobiographical stories. Alternatively, the interviewee from The Black Boy in Surrey used the often quoted idea that King Charles II had passed through the local area and had been noted to have dark, swarthy features.

'[The pub] It's about 500 years old I'm not quite sure how it got its name. There are several versions. The sign was to show it was a tobacconist. Also King Charles 11 used to come here, he had darkened hair and shadows round his eyes and they nick-named him the black boy but we're not quiet sure where it came from'.......

This is a vague and less personally connected story, which can be seen to operate as a kind of safety valve to cover over or naturalise issues of race and difference. Here, The Black Boy title becomes a familiar nickname for the Monarch. Interestingly I have noted in research that this royal reference is a relatively recent attribute about the Black Boy pub (Hill. 1949)

'at Farnham, according to the authorities, the pub was named after the eldest son of King Edward III. Naturally the sign displayed his portrait. It has become considerably weather-beaten and effaced, for on one of its restorations the sign painter, blissfully ignorant of its historical associations, painted the portrait of negro chief!'

Older pub signs books such as the encyclopedic book, History of the Signboards (Larwood1868) make no reference to the black boy as special for King Charles. Both of the anecdotal stories cited have a basis in popular story telling. This is very clearly illustrated in the many stories about the runaway slave who is given sanctuary by a benign landlord which leads in turn to the pub gaining the name of The Black Boy. At the Oxford Black Boy pub the manager, Leyton King recounts the following;

'There is a story about a young black slave who was attached to the local manor down the road and ran away from the manor house. The landlord that was at the pub offered him refuge and food and kept him in the cellar hid him. And that's the real story'......

Q. Did he keep him as a slave?

'He was granted his freedom and he stayed on I don't know where he's taken from there. I can visualise a small frightened child who meets this benevolent landlord helping him and hiding him in his cellar or somewhere he may be discovered. He must have been quite a benevolent fellow because he also gave the land the church next door is built upon'.....

BEEFEATER STEAK HOUSE

The Black Boy

A · B · C
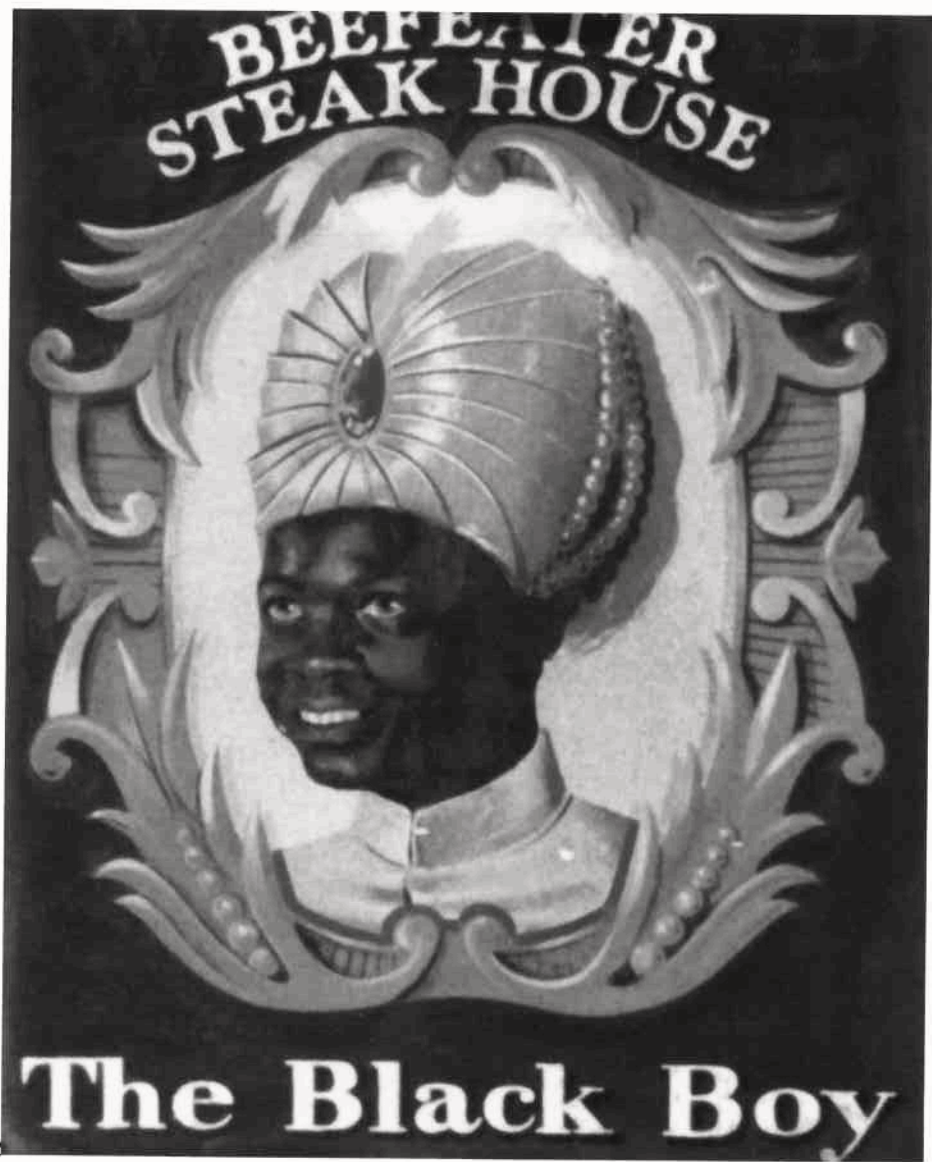
How does the sign exist as a marker of commerce, as an advertisement for the leisure industry?

Local story telling was not the only context for the naming of the Black Boy. Its naming was also an indicator of historic commerce within the public house industry. In conjunction with the process of photo-documentation and interviewing locals I conducted historical research in local libraries, antiquarian books and local experts to gain a fuller understanding of the function and meaning of the pub sign. What this revealed was that visual signs were related to the local production of wine and beer and originally signaled their readiness for consumption at particular houses. Together with the availability of other commodities, such a coffee, chocolate and tobacco. These later 'new world' commodities began to be visually represented by the use of the black figure, often a young black boy. The representation of the black figure could vary in the characterisation of African or Moorish figures. The latter would wear a turban and beard together with the Islamic emblems of Moon and Stars. This imagery overlapped with that of 'The Saracen' and Turks Head or the Arab Boy. Such signs emerged from the onwards. From that time when it was a legal requirement for the landlords name to be recorded. (Corbalis 1988) There is of course a complex history of the subsequent development of public houses over the next two centuries with industrialisation, the expansion of cities and with rural depopulation. The rise in popularity of the coffee house in Europe particularly in London in the 17th century referenced the Ottoman Empire with many coffee houses also using names such as Turks Head, Saracens head, Blacks Head, Black Boy. Additionally the Indian Princes was said to be a reference to Pocahontas. Towards the end of the 17th the majority of the coffee and chocolate houses had fallen in to decline with a few transformed into public houses and taverns.

The number of public houses in urban towns and cities expanded enormously during the nineteenth century. What happened to the reference to new world commodities through the use of black iconography through this history is exceptionally hard to know, but, in looking at the geographical position of the remaining black named pubs it becomes clearer that they were named mostly during the 17th and 18th C and the tradition of naming pubs with reference to black identity did not persist into the 19th and 20th Centuries. My research on the location of the seventy signs in my study showed that they were commonly placed in the centre of towns and near market squares, often on the main high roads between major towns.

How do these signs evolve aesthetically or pictorially through political and demographic change, or in many cases being erased completely over time?

The iconography of The Black Boy is constantly in flux and one way of thinking about this is through the visual language of the sign painters, which like other aspects of visual culture is open to shifts and changes in political ideas, styles and commercial imperatives. (Inn Signs Society) The examples we see here are the black boy being imaged as a charcoal burner, chimney sweep, or in various animal incarnations such as the horses head, a black faced sheep on open moors, black kittens. The Black Boy is also changed into a ship's buoy in several examples.

Interestingly the sign of The Black Boy in Hull, just down the road from the old William Wilberforce museum, includes within the illustration reference to both history and commerce,

THE BLACK BOY

The Black Boy

Mitchells & Butlers

'it has by turn been a corn merchants, a wine & spirit merchant, gin shop, a brothel, a coffee shop and a tobacco and snuff shop...a corridor leads to the dark paneled front bar with a carving of the head a black boy over the fireplace....the walls are decorated with hand bills and prints about the slave trade, reflecting the pub name and the William Wilberforce connections' ....

The present incarnation of the sign illustrates a familiar figure wearing a tobacco leaf headdress, holding a tobacco roll and strangely a canoe paddle and wearing white shorts.

The erasure of the Black Boy is somewhat easier to grasp as the following two examples show. During the research I found The Green Man and Black's Head in Asbourne. This is historically noteworthy for being the last gallows type pub sign, which stretches across the road and is now owned by the local District Council. A visiting black person complained that the pub sign was offensive, because it was a racist caricature, consisting only of a 'decapitated' head. The Council refused to remove the sign and the complaint went to the Council's Equal Opportunities Officer. The complaint was rejected and the sign is still there. The issue was reported in the local council newsletter.

The Black Boy in Tottenham received a similar complaint from local Black families who objected to their children having to see the pub sign on their way to school. As a result the pub changed the images to that of a chimney sweep.

Mostly recently the illustration for Labour in Vain pub sign in Sussex, features a black child in a bathtub. On one side of the sign the boy is being scrubbed by a white woman, and on the reverse side the woman looks perplexed, as she has not been able to scrub him clean and by inference, white. This narrative representation is possibly based upon a historical myth of 'the devil in the tub'.

This process of erasure is illustrated by the conflict that developed over the planned replacement of the Labour in Vain sign. A plan was developed to preserve the existing sign in the local Museum and hold a competition to design a replacement sign, with supporting project of educational programs. Local opposition to the project demanded that the sign should remain and as a result of campaigning in the local and national press, the project was abandoned after having successfully held the competition and selected an alternative design. Strangely the original sign mysteriously disappeared and shortly afterwards the pub changed hands.

How, in turn, do these small changes in the iconography of the Black Boy pub sign, make visible the bigger changes in national and cultural identity?

The photographic documentation of the Black Boy pub signs reveal changes in pictorial styles and conventions drawing from caricatures, commercial advertising, graphic design, fine art oil painting and more recently newspapers and photography. In general pub sign painters are defined within the framework of the acquisition of graphic and pictorial skills allied to commercial art. The collection demonstrates a range of styles and standards of skills on the part of the producer. Given the material conditions of the signs in the British climate, weathering required their repainting on average every ten years.

The process of repainting often involved tracing through the existing design style and pictorial image which might subtly be modified or more radically be changed. So for example, a pub whose sign is changed from a black figure the more safe illustration of a chimney sweep. For example an Essex black boy pub is situated next door to the local Conservative Club. The Club has a wooden lintel over the former doorway, which incorporates two carved Moorish heads, bearded and wearing turbans. It is likely that at an earlier period the entrance to the Conservative Club was in fact that of that of the Black Boy pub next door and that the carved sign are an indication that the sign would have been that of a black figure.

The figure of the Moorish head occurs throughout Europe most notably as part of the insignia of the Pope and as part of the national emblem of Corsica. Over time, as I have indicated in other examples, the figure of the chimney sweep. This change has often replaced the overt representation of a 'non-white' figure, whereas the carved figures over the doorway, not as

easily erased, stand as a reminder of an earlier period. An Oxfordshire Black Boy pub retains three past signs that very clearly shows changes in pictorial style. These include that of a dark skinned young boy, wearing a bead necklace and his upper body wrapped in a loose cloth, to that of a young contemporary black youth wearing what looks like a white T-shirt, and a styled hair-cut. Interestingly, the background of both representations, locate the figure in an open of landscape of a savannah with recognisable English Oak trees in one illustration and palm trees in the other.

A different example of recontextualisation can be found in Massing's 'Washing the Ethiopian', which traces a much longer history, stemming from Aesop's Fables, that traces the idea of washing clean the darkness. This idea was part of the European colonialist thinking of 'civilising the native'. This idea is also reflected in advertising for selling soap, as a 'cleansing' agent that again used the ideal of 'washing the dark skin white' as a selling point for the effectiveness of the product. All of these ideas utilised a racist caricature that presents a limited and essentialist view of the black subject.

More recently Spike Lee's film 'Bamboozled', a challenging film that explored the commercialisation of these racist caricatures within the television network. The drama looked at the ways television producers make use of negative representations of the black subject to increase audience rating figures. He posits the idea that audiences are invited to collude with the producers in confirming the currency of racial stereotyping.

During visits to pubs I have collected stories from pub going that offer a reconceptualization of the black subject and that continue to present links to the historical experience of Colonialisation and Slavery. For example, stories of specific pub names being linked to run-away slaves who found refuge in the pub through a benign landlord. Contemporary accounts also contain a number of mythic narratives about individuals who may have been responsible for the name of the pubs.

This in some ways confirms my original working hypothesis. Public house signs function within social spaces that have specific and localised geographical, economic and cultural histories. The anecdotal evidence also supports the view that these remaining illustrations constitute unique signs and markers of location. These are in part images that still act as triggers for the recovery of hidden histories that may have been connected to wider longer cultural, histories of a black presence in Britain.

Q. What relationships can be made between the contemporary public house sign and wider representations of the black subject in popular culture?

A. My historical research included the representation of the black subject in 19th and 20th century across a range of imagery, including fine art, photography, print media and advertising in British, North American and European collections. In addition to this end I visited the collection of black racist memorabilia at the Jim Crow Museum at Big Rapids University in Michigan. The archive contained a extensive collection of kinetic toys involving the representations of marginalise people including black people.

The combination of these varied collections an reference points, acted as a trigger for story telling, as a means to articulate and naturalise a particular series of the black presence in a predominantly white culture. I made video and photographic recordings of objects in the Jim Crow museum collection, in order to better understand the differences in aesthetic modes of representations. Be that between between the largely 'realistic' images of the black pub signs and the negative images in the museum. These both have a relationship within popularised traditions of European oil painting and the simplified 'racist' caricatures of the kinetic toys and commercial co-modification of products..

There are a number of artists in the United States who make use of racist archetypal stereotypes such as Kara Walker and Michel Ray Charles. Charles, was is a commercially successful African American painter originally from Louisiana, uses racist stereotypes, such as the 'minstrel' the 'sports start' and the 'mammy' to comment upon Black people's exploitation in sport and the US capitalist system. While commenting upon the negative reception of his work by Black academics in the USA Charles states;

.... 'They are about the negative stereotypes that African-Americans still buy into and how they update them, hide behind them. They are just below the surface, on TV sitcoms and cartoons of every vintage and in advertising and sports. They are about a deconstruction of the symbols and tracing their history past and present.

Some of the anger directed at Charles inclusion of racial stereotypes in his work demonstrates the continued potency of such images which are not diminished by calls made for the removal of such images within a Fine Art practice. The point for me is that such signs are part of everyday visual culture, in pub signs and in toys, whilst the more overt racist stereotypes, in children's books for example, have been largely removed. The meanings behind the black boy are still current and potent.

A very recent example of my point is illustrated by the radio program, 'The Mystery of the Black Boy' (Radio 4 2008) written and presented by Lemn Sissay. The program explored the reasons behind the historic naming of the Black Boy pubs, which covered similar ground to my own research. However, Sissay drew an opposite conclusion to myself in arguing for the removal of the name Black Boy pubs. He considered the name to be actively offensive.

......'To defend the black boy as a representation of King Charles 11 is one thing, to defend the black boy as a fetish derived from slavery is quite another thing. Personally I won't walk into a black boy pub again. I'm a Black Man and I find the term derogatory and belittling, a throw back to less enlightened times when the black male was emasculated by being called a boy. That is part of our British history and to ignore it is to deny it. Some people may call the removal of the black boy politically correct, some may call it correct. .... But if we do see the end of the black boy pub I for one won't shed a tear' ..

Whist I am aware of this argument, I maintain the educational value and the reflections on British history and culture opens area's for discussion and negotiation. There is not a singular history to be unpacked or erasing the offensive, but instead an opportunity to come to terms with the unsettling ways in which the past and present can coalesce over a pint of beer.

Conclusion

At this juncture in my ongoing research I am somewhat reluctant to draw any definitive conclusions. When I explain the project to people, the typical response to what I have discovered is framed by the question; Well, how did the pubs come to have those names? This question has long ceased to be the centre of my interest, because what I now believe is that the meanings of the text and visual signs, have many points of origin with no one fixed meaning. Over the course of 400 years such signs have been part of a number of discourses as I hope I have demonstrated, ranging from the local and parochial, to the metropolitan and international. I am continually struck by how the materiality of the visual is not obviously separated from the fabric of its environment and hence is continually part of the present, even if overlooked, or even, dare I say, Hidden in a Public Space.

I now have a collection of data related to the research project, which has, so far, not been widely disseminated other than in a number of talks and lectures. The research data generated continues to feed generally into my teaching on visual methodologies, landscape and issues of black representation.