

Institution: University of Exeter		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Increasing knowledge and awareness of black British theatre, film and television		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name: Michael Pearce	Role (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer, Drama	Period employed by submitting HEI: 01/01/2015 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Dr Michael Pearce's research on transnational black British theatre has impacted on the profile and visibility of black British cultural activity. It has increased cultural knowledge and awareness of the historical contributions made by artists of African and Caribbean descent to British theatre, film and TV via an award-winning 10-part BBC Radio 4 documentary presented by Lenny Henry. It has aided the BBC in achieving its commitment to deliver diverse programming and influenced the broader public equality and diversity discourse. Pearce's work with the National Theatre has restored and preserved the historical and contemporary work of black playwrights and practitioners in the UK by documenting their contribution to British theatre's historical record within the publicly accessible digital Black Plays Archive.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Black British theatre and performance is an under-researched area of academic enquiry. Pearce's research has contributed knowledge to this nascent field while opening up new critical pathways through the introduction of a transnational and transhistorical analytic approach that traces international influences on contemporary black British playwrights' work.</p> <p>Pearce's approach examines black British theatre and performance in its historical, social and political context in the UK and also in relation to the cultural and geographical spaces of Africa, the Caribbean and the USA. Underpinning Pearce's approach is the argument that a national paradigm is not sufficient to comprehend black British theatre's complex history and the range of cultural and political influences that have shaped narrative and aesthetic development of black British plays. Neither does a national paradigm provide adequate analytic tools for thinking through these complex cultural processes.</p> <p>Pearce's research findings have resulted in numerous publications. In particular, Pearce's monograph <i>Black British Drama: A Transnational Story</i> (2017, Routledge) [3.1] has contributed to new knowledge by documenting performances of plays on the British stage by African American, African and Caribbean dramatists which had been forgotten or about which little was known. The book also analyses plays by black British playwrights who have received little critical attention as well as established playwrights whose work forms part of existing scholarship. By situating these British plays within the relational spaces of the African diaspora Pearce provides new insights into how they are affected, in form and content, by other black performance practices and politics. In this monograph, Pearce also provides the first detailed exploration of the influence of the USA on black playwriting in Britain from the 1960s to the first decade of the 2000s, in particular demonstrating the creative and political impact and legacy of US Black Power and the Black Arts Movement. In addition, Pearce brings new perspectives to the comparatively well-documented history of late 20th century drama by playwrights of Caribbean heritage in the UK by reading it through the theoretical concept of creolization.</p>		

Furthermore, he provides the first detailed account of African British and British African theatre makers working in the UK since the 1990s. Using the notion of diaspora as an analytic framework, Pearce introduces the concept of the 1.5-generation to describe the complex narrative and aesthetic innovations of playwrights who arrived in the UK as adolescents and therefore spent formative years both in the UK and the countries of their birth.

Pearce's elaboration of black British theatre's transnational nature has enabled historical and contemporary relationships between black British practitioners and artists and activists in the USA and countries in Africa and the Caribbean to be highlighted, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the wider social, cultural and political contexts in which black British theatre is generated, and of how it echoes and extends current antiracism debates and decolonizing performance practices in an increasingly globalized world [3.2 and 3.3].

Professor Lynette Goddard, a leading black British theatre scholar, has called Pearce's book a 'pertinent contribution', noting in particular 'the innovation of Pearce's approach', which complements earlier studies 'while opening out potential new directions for analysis' [3.4].

Pearce's monograph was shortlisted for the 2017 Society for Theatre Research (STR) Theatre Book Prize and was nominated for the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Early Career Research Prize 2019 [3.5 and 3.6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1. Monograph: Pearce, M. (2017). *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story*. London: Routledge. [Submitted to REF2021]

3.2. Sample publication on research not included in the monograph and employing the transnational methodology: Pearce, M. (2020). 'Black Rage: Diasporic Empathy and Ritual in debbie tucker green's *hang*', in Adiseshiah, S. and J. Bolton (eds.), *debbie tucker green: Critical Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 23-44. [Submitted to REF2021]

3.3. Sample conference paper of research not included in the monograph employing the transnational methodology: Pearce, M. (2018). 'Biyi Bandele's Theatre of the Afropolitan Absurd'. *African Theatre Association International Conference*, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, 6-9 July 2017. [Can be supplied on request]

3.4. Book review: Goddard, L. (2019). Review of *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story* by Michael Pearce. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 7(2), pp. 356–360. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2019-0033>

3.5. STR Prize shortlisting comments: Email from STR The Society of Theatre Research. [Can be supplied on request]

3.6. TaPRA Prize nomination and shortlisting panel comments. Email from TaPRA Theatre and Performance Research Association. [Can be supplied on request]

4. Details of the impact

The historical marginalisation of black British theatre in the academy is mirrored in the theatre, film and television industries in Britain, where black practitioners continue to struggle against a lack of diversity in the workforce, inequality of opportunity and issues with stereotypical and/or lack of representation on stage and screen. Located within the broader context of national and international campaigns to decolonize education and of campaigns to diversify the British arts and entertainment industry, Pearce's research has contributed to raising the profile and visibility of black British cultural activity.

According to the ethical principles that inform this underpinning research, at all stages of the activities related to the wider application of Pearce's research the voices of black practitioners have been foregrounded.

Raising the profile and visibility of black British cultural activity

Pearce's research has increased cultural knowledge and awareness of the historical contributions made by artists of African and Caribbean descent to British theatre, film, and TV. His research resulted in a ground-breaking BBC Radio 4 documentary about the history of black performance on the British stage and screen, *Raising the Bar: 100 Years of Black British Theatre and Screen* (November 2015), which was presented by Sir Lenny Henry [5.1]. Pearce was commissioned by the BBC to conceive the series and to act as the programme's research consultant. Pearce designed the series around his transnational approach, incorporating episodes that focused on African, Caribbean and US influences alongside major markers of British history. Pearce contributed historical context and analysis alongside interviews with, among others, Bola Agbaje, Michael Buffong, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Yvonne Brewster, Isaac Julien, Mustapha Matura, Steve McQueen, Carmen Munroe, Horace Ove, Winsome Pinnock and Paulette Randall. Pearce's research ensured forgotten, rarely commented on and/or marginalised voices from within this history were showcased alongside more established voices. Pearce also facilitated contact and intercession with the National Theatre's (NT) Black Plays Archive (BPA) project, enabling broadcast access to interviews with black theatre practitioners which he had previously carried out for BPA. Pearce's extensive historical and international research prompted the length of the documentary - an unprecedented 10-part series.

Raising the Bar assisted the BBC in achieving its commitment to deliver diverse programming against the objective to create 'high quality programming which reflects modern Britain accurately and authentically' as outlined in the BBC's Diversity Strategy 2011-2015 [5.2]. At the time, the BBC was under criticism for the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in Britain's broadcasting industry. Only 5.4% of the workforce identified as black or minority ethnic, and Lenny Henry's lecture at BAFTA (2014) demanded that BBC leaders should be held to account. The series aided the BBC in starting to rectify this issue. The inclusion of Henry indicated the programme's significance to the BBC, and its prime-time slot was a deliberate attempt to capture as large an audience as possible to enhance cultural knowledge and awareness. Series Producer, Simon Elmes, affirms that *Raising the Bar* 'was seen very much as a landmark for BAME representation on the network' [5.3]. When first broadcast in 2015, the series had an estimated audience of 2.5 million listeners each week, and it scored a notably high AI (Appreciation Index) score of 84 out of 100 [5.4]. The fact the series was re-broadcast on BBC Radio 4 Extra in July 2018 and was released on Amazon's Audible platform in 2019 highlights the series' continuing relevance and reach [5.5; 5.1]. The BBC's *Equality Information Report 2016/17* specifically mentions the documentary as an example of a BBC programme representing the UK's diverse communities and experiences on radio [5.3]. The series won the **BBC Radio Award for Outstanding Contribution to Diversity in 2016**. Comments from the panel highlighted its 'impact as a radio series' and the 'strong links to a wider diversity story involving the National Theatre and the creation of an audio and online archive'. [5.6].

Raising the Bar was widely seen across the BBC as a timely and well-targeted opportunity to showcase the force of black British talent throughout the UK creative industries. It received significant press coverage and citation, which resulted in a broader public equality and diversity discourse. The review in *The Observer* called the series a 'vital piece of work' [5.5]. It also generated significant interest on social media, including a tweet from Baroness Doreen Lawrence. [5.5]. In addition, the BBC radio series prompted an article in *WhatsOnStage.com* assessing diversity initiatives for contemporary playwrights and raising awareness of continued challenges [5.7].

Enhancing equality and diversity discourse

Pearce has also influenced the broader public equality and diversity discourse by advocating for increased resources to support diversity in UK film and theatre and increased programming

of black British work. His contributions to policy debates and stakeholder campaigns have helped challenge established norms. His research for the radio series has been cited by significant voices who are addressing issues of equality and diversity in the arts; including in Afua Hirsch's bestselling book *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018) and Jessie Burton's bestselling novel *The Muse* (2016) [5.7]. Major cultural and public sector organisations have invited him to frame some of those debates: Pearce co-organised with Professor Lynette Goddard an interdisciplinary symposium, *Representing Race and Black Britain in Theatre, Film, Television and Digital Media*, at the National Theatre (NT) (November 2015) and was a guest speaker at the theatre's workshop event about 20th century African American Playwrights (NT, February 2016) [5.8]. In addition, he chaired a panel on commissioning at the national conference, *40 Years On: The Arts Britain Ignores and Diversity in British Theatre* (October 2016) [5.8]. Pearce was an invited speaker at a cross-Whitehall conference arranged by the Civil Service Race Forum for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (March 2016) [5.8]. Pearce's research continues to bring together non-academic audiences and scholars around the topic of black British theatre, film and television and related issues of racism and equal opportunities and to raise awareness of black marginalisation in the creative industries.

Restoring the contribution of black theatre practitioners to British theatre's historical record via the National Theatre's (NT) digital Black Plays Archive (BPA)

An accurate and detailed historical record and repository of plays and productions by black practitioners is of vital importance to present and future British actors, directors, playwrights, producers and audiences.

The National Theatre (NT)'s Black Plays Archive (BPA) is an online resource initiated by Kwame Kwei-Armah and supported by Arts Council England and Sustained Theatre. Pearce's research contribution to this archive commemorates black theatre and widens public awareness and cultural knowledge of its achievements. His research and work with the NT has helped to create a record of every first professional production of African, Caribbean and black British plays produced in the UK. This record has been made accessible to a wider public and enabled it to (re-) discover a long and rich tradition of plays by black dramatists, many of which had been forgotten [5.9]. According to the NT's Director of Broadcast and Digital responsible for developing and launching the BPA, Pearce played a 'key' role in the project's design and development, working alongside the Project Manager, Natasha Bonnelame, and the NT's Archive, Learning and Digital departments [5.9]. Pearce's ongoing work with the BPA, for over a decade, has contributed a number of significant interviews with practitioners (including Mojisola Adebayo, Oladipo Agboluaje, Yvonne Brewster, Arinze Kene, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Mustapha Matura, Roy Williams). Pearce also wrote an historical essay as context for the website, and he consulted on the digital exhibition *Black Plays at the National Theatre* on the Google Art and Culture platform [5.9].

The BPA has a substantial audience: 94,851 visits from over 75,000 users with the return rate of over 20% since going live online in 2012. Approximately 50% of visits have been international users from countries in Europe, the Caribbean, South Asia, Africa, and North America [5.10]. The BPA has successfully employed digital technology to promote knowledge about black British theatre in the UK and internationally to a far greater audience than previously possible. This has provided an effective way of making archival material widely available and easy to access in order to address the forgotten histories of black playwrights and practitioners in the UK. The BPA has also influenced theatre programming. For example, Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, which was revived by the NT in 2012, was brought to the theatre's attention by the BPA's then manager Similia Hodge-Dallaway. This indicative example underlines the importance of an historical record and repository of plays and productions in informing the work of present and future Black British actors, directors, playwrights, producers and audiences.

The BPA continues to expand, a process Pearce contributes to by working with NT's Head of Archives to update the archive annually. Pearce's research for the BPA has also been used in

other linked resources that are expanding access to and knowledge about black theatre in Britain. Research and practitioner interviews carried out by Pearce for the BPA have been used in NT's *That Black Theatre Podcast* (12 episodes launched 28 September 2020) [5.7], and for an article about Black British theatre for the British Library's 'Discovering Literature' web pages [5.7]. In the context of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, Pearce's *Black British Drama* and the BPA have also been highlighted as key sources of information about black theatre in Britain [5.7]. This demonstrates the ongoing relevance and reach of Pearce's research and its contribution to the visibility of black British theatre.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1. BBC Radio Documentary: *Raising the Bar: 100 years of Black British Theatre and Screen*.** 10 x 15-minute documentary broadcast over two weeks presented by Sir Lenny Henry. First broadcast BBC Radio 4 November 2015. Second broadcast BBC Radio 4 Extra July 2018. Accessible here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06phflx>. Also available to download with Audible, Available here: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Raising-Bar-British-Theatre-Screen/dp/B07S969K1Y>
- 5.2. BBC diversity aims and objectives: *Diversity Strategy 2011-2015*.** Available here: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/diversity/pdf/Diversity_strategy_110523.pdf and the BBC's *Equality Information Report 2016/17*, available here: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/diversity/pdf/equality-information-report-2017.pdf>
- 5.3. Letter from the BBC series producer:** letter from Simon Elmes.
- 5.4. Listener figures and Appreciation Index (AI) for *Raising the Bar: 100 years of Black British Theatre and Screen*:** email from BBC.
- 5.5. Media coverage: *Raising the Bar: 100 years of Black British Theatre and Screen*,** including publicity and press releases, responses in reviews and social media/Twitter.
- 5.6. BBC Radio Award: for Outstanding Contribution to Diversity for *Raising the Bar: 100 years of Black British Theatre and Screen*:** email with judging panel feedback.
- 5.7. Reach:** WhatsOnStage article about diversity in playwriting, available here: https://www.whatsonstage.com/bath-theatre/news/matt-trueman-has-diversity-in-theatre-stalled_39296.html; *Raising the Bar* cited in Hirsch, A. (2018). *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging*. London: Vintage (Chapter 6); cited in Burton, J. (2016). *The Muse*. London: Picador (pp. 446) ; National Theatre's *That Black Theatre Podcast*, hosted by Nadine and Nadia Deller, available here: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/blog/that-black-theatre-podcast>; British Library article 'Black British Theatre, 1950-1979' by Natasha Bonnelame, available here: <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/black-british-theatre-1950-1979>; Various articles highlighting the BPA as a resource following BLM protests 2020, available here: The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jun/10/black-lives-matter-four-plays-that-resonate-amid-the-protests?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other; ADC theatre <https://www.adctheatre.com/blacklivesmatter>; Varsity <https://www.varsity.co.uk/theatre/19403>; Pearce's *Black British Drama* highlighted in various Twitter posts as a source of further reading about black British theatre.
- 5.8 Guest speaker events and engagement:** emails from organisers, attendee feedback and responses on social media.
- 5.9. Letter from the Head of Archive at the National Theatre; letter from (former) Director of Broadcast and Digital at the National Theatre:** letters.
- 5.10. Black Plays Archive webpage:** <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/>; access data: details of number of page views and unique visits to the website provided by the NT.