

A luta continua

A conversation with Michael La Rose

Camille Crichlow, Arianna Mercado, Adeena Mey | Conversation, 2023

Founded by Michael La Rose's father John La Rose, New Beacon Books is rooted in the work of Caribbean intellectuals challenging the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Emerging as a hub for political and cultural organising in London's Finsbury Park neighbourhood, the bookshop's origins are closely tied to the Black supplementary school movement in the UK, which addressed educational gaps and institutional racism. As a bookshop, New Beacon is committed to children's literature and representation, navigating the complexities of class within Black communities. Today, it remains a crucial resource for education and activism.

Camille Crichlow

To begin, could you speak about New Beacon Books and the context in which it was started as a cultural and political initiative, institution, and community?

Michael La Rose

Organisations like ours come from a tradition. If we step back a bit, New Beacon was started because my father, John La Rose was influenced by The Beacon magazine in Trinidad, where intellectuals were self-validating Caribbean art, culture, and aesthetics. Part of this group were C.L.R. James, Alfred Mendes, Ralph de Boissiere, all of whom were classically European trained thinkers, which gave them the basis for saying, what we do here [in the Caribbean] is just as good and important. They looked at folklore, novels, criticism, music. This self-validation is an important part of the experience of the slave trade, colonialism, and post-colonialism. It continues and has to continue, because these forces that want to put us in a certain position won't stop.

In the context of the Caribbean struggles, both the Beacon art movement period and the physical political struggles are very important for us. This would include the 1930s insurrections up and down the Caribbean, which fought for better pay and conditions under the colonial governments and the empire that also mobilised them to organise and form trade unions up to independence. All that experience, then, gave a series of people, including John La Rose, an idea of how empires, the colonial system, and those who collaborate within it works, alongside the importance of art and culture.

John continued his political work in London with other exiles from the Caribbean. He found that the reality, especially for working class Caribbean people, was very, very difficult. There

was racial violence on the streets as well as institutional racism from the police, schools, housing, everybody and people organised around it. One of the organisations that came out of this political work was New Beacon Books, and a parallel organisation that came out at the same time was the Caribbean Artists Movement.

You could say that New Beacon was always linked to political and artistic movements within the Black community. And it has always seen itself as not just informing and strengthening the immediate community, as a resource for information and knowledge, but also informing British society, because our experience in the Caribbean under the British Empire was just as valid as anybody else's.

Camille Crichlow

What about the surrounding neighbourhood of Finsbury Park? How is the bookshop connected to the geography of Black movements in this specific locale and London more broadly?

Michael La Rose

There are areas in London – Brixton, Peckham, Shepherds Bush, Ladbroke Grove, Tottenham, Finsbury Park as the main centres. We didn't have the American apartheid system, so these populations lived freely, between previous waves of immigration, from the Huguenots to the Irish. In the 1980s, there was an aspect of a politically unified immigrant population, between Caribbeans, South Indians, and Africans, collectively termed 'Black'. The Finsbury Park area was essentially Black and Irish.

Stroud Green Road, where we are based, was the place where you could get Caribbean vegetables and visit hairdressers. There were also restaurants – there used to be about five, but now there are only three left. This whole area, from here to Crouch End, has become gentrified. I grew up here. I lived above the shop. When I lived in this area, you could not get a black cab into Finsbury Park because it was too dangerous as far as they were concerned with Irish and Blacks.

Arianna Mercado

Specific to the bookshop, what were the conditions and context of selling books in London? What was the bookshop scene like at the time?

Michael La Rose

New Beacon is connected to a political movement that was about Black children and education in Britain. John started the first Black supplementary schools which recognised a problem with British education. These supplementary schools were formed mainly on Saturdays or certain times towards the weekend. These involved extra schooling on the basics: English, Maths, and History. Working class education is not talked about a lot. There

is no working class education because neglect is embedded within the class system in Britain. The white boys I went to school with were totally against education, because they instinctively knew it was against their class. Schooling was essentially middle class education given to working class youths.

Institutional racism in schools greatly affected Black children. There was bussing, which happened when you didn't have too much of a concentration of Black kids in one school. These Black children would be bussed to different schools. Streaming, which segregates between the O level GCSE (Ordinary Level General Certificate of Secondary Education) and a lower level CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education). Essentially, CSE is reserved for working class kids. The most serious one was putting kids into ESN schools (Educationally Subnormal Schools). The kind of white superiority and racism within the institutional structure of the schools meant that if these kids couldn't tell you about English History or English situations, they would then place them into educationally subnormal schools.

Coming from the Caribbean, we knew from our colonial experience, that education helps you go up. When migrants arrive, it's a shock because they not only find that their children are victimised, but that students often come out of school not reading, writing, or adding up properly. Some of them came to Britain especially for education. They didn't know that the much desired British education system is only above grammar school level. Below grammar school level, it doesn't give the working class kids anything.

Surprising in this country, but if you look at the statistics, you'll find English and Maths are the worst subjects for passers in this country, for the mass of the population. If you went to Eton or Harrow, it was very good. If you went to a comprehensive school in London, or anywhere in Britain, you'll find these very poor. These Black parents decided they needed to do something about it. People like my father was able to organise them into supplementary schools dealing with Maths and English, dealing with what is not taught in schools, mainly the complete history of Britain, which included slavery and the empire. These schools also put into question the continuation of Caribbean culture, such as folk songs and folktales. The first supplementary school was formed by my father was a blueprint. People and different organisations took it and did their own schools all over the country.

Adeena Mey

What were the actual concrete setups for self-organised schools?

Michael La Rose

First of all, you had to be committed. You have to have committed parents and committed teachers, which meant that you had to meet somewhere. You used your house, if you had a house or rented. People used their front rooms to have the school. You must have committed teachers. There was no money involved. You did it because you felt that it was an important

task. The children had to be well behaved and learn. It's not the kind of colonial education we came from, which was much more physical. This was about your parents wanting you to learn, to give you a rounded education because they're not teaching everything in school. In our school, we expected the parents to give us money to keep the school going, for materials, among others. And that would be per family, not per child.

Camille Crichlow

I also noticed you have a lot of children's books at the front.

Michael La Rose

It is one of the main reasons for the establishment of New Beacon Books. Apart from education and historical knowledge, we also put into question of children not having any representation in their lives here in Britain, and constantly being told that you're criminals, of that you're this or that.

Camille Crichlow

This is particularly a phenomenon in the US, but there's been these book ban of children's books that cover issues of diversity, and other kind of gender sexuality debates. I was wondering if you've had any pushback or experience any kind of cultural shift in the last few years?

Michael La Rose

There's always been pushback. Always, from the start. They ask us, why do you need Black books? Why are you segregationist? And all this kind of stuff! We said no, we're filling in the gaps that you leave out. People, Black and white, with information about their past, will know how to look at their future. They can't be told bullshit by the media.

There has historically been a pushback to keep Black population doing menial labour. Caribbean people came here on an invitation for manual labour. When they came with their qualifications as nurses, doctors, all kinds of professions, they weren't recognised Britain. Although it came from the same empire system, they wouldn't recognise them because they didn't want them to go into those areas of work. This has continued even after the empire. They continue to keep Black people, especially young people, oppressed. At one point, if there was more than three Black youths on the corner, police would zoom in and there would be an altercation, either on the street or in the police station, then false charges. That gives you a criminal record, which says that you can't get a job.

Because of this, the Black population self-organised. In the 70s, we formed the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement, and then another organisation called The Alliance. After the New Cross Massacre and the Black People's Day of Action, came the 1981 insurrections up and down the country. It was preceded by the Notting Hill Riots (1958) and so on, but this

was the real thing of Black and white youths being very clear about the police and the state because we were ready to tear up the place.

The British are a very special set of empire builders. They look back on their successes and their difficulties and use those examples to deal with it. They saw what was happening in Britain in 1981 and looked back on the Caribbean insurrections of the 1930s. They decided that they needed to form a Black middle class as quickly as possible, to create a buffer between these righteous people and the state. They then magically opened every door in this society from being a Grenadier Guard, to being a teacher, or a social worker.

Camille Crichlow

What were the specific political movements that New Beacon has been engaging with since the 70s?

Michael La Rose

With New Beacon, we go back to the education and the experience before we came to Britain. John used to say we did not come alive in Britain. These prior experiences helped us shape a philosophy for the bookshop. We must publish so that publications crosses generations. We're not business people, we're activists in business. Our activism requires us to run a business. Our space is a space for us, and the whole community, to organise in. We've done it up to today, where we have book launches and presentations held by fellow activists, artists, and writers.

We were also involved with resistance movements abroad. In the 80s, we formed the International Book Fair for Radical Black and Third World Books together with Bogle L'Ouverture Publications and Race Today Publications. These are people we've been working with the last 15–20 years. The most important things that I learned were the supplementary school information. I would be arguing with my history teacher in school, and he would admit that I was right in front of the whole class. That gave me power.

New Beacon is cross-generational. We recognise that each generation has a different experience, but it's important to transfer that information back and forth to make us stronger. The kind of hierarchical systems like chair, secretary, treasurer are only operative roles, and we can rotate them. For instance, in the Black Parents Movement or the Black Youth Movement, they were some very experienced people and some not very experienced people, but each person was given the experience of chairing a meeting.

We deeply understood how the court system worked in Britain, the relationship with the police and other institutions, especially the Magistrates Court. When we went into campaigns against the police, we learned how to take legal statements, which would be good enough to be put in front of a judge or a court. It was not only about taking witness statements, but being

witnesses ourselves, and how important it was to be a witness. When we campaigned with people who got arrested, we would be alongside their families in fighting for them. But we couldn't take them where they don't want to go. They needed to be committed to whatever strategy that we've come up with, which is a political strategy both inside and outside the court. We learned these from a famous case called the Mangrove Nine.

Adeena Mey

The one John La Rose made a film about, *The Mangrove Nine* (1973).

Michael La Rose

That's right. The Mangrove Nine case was ground-breaking for those reasons. My father made a documentary about it because the method was so important. He was also one of their advisors. An important thing in that Mangrove trial was the relationship between the legal strategy of the person accused and the lawyers. Traditionally, you take the lawyer's advice and they do what they want inside the court. None of that in the Mangrove Nine, and none of that in the campaigns we organised. At that time, there was a push for using Black lawyers. We said we didn't care what colour they are, but they've got to take instructions from us. The only lawyer that would do that at that time was Ian McDonald. No Black lawyers, no white lawyers would do that.

A lot of cases came out from the Black Parents Movement, Black Youth Movement against the police. I think the most famous one was a guy called Newton Rose, who was jailed for murdering someone from the National Front in Hackney. He was already in jail by the time they came to us. We went and formed the committee with his parents and his girlfriend. Through this, we learned about the deep, deep corruption and connection between the National Front and the police in Hackney. Even if he had already been convicted, we won that case and got him out of jail.

Arianna Mercado

In relation to the question of political and class solidarity, how has New Beacon strived to move towards this goal amidst the de-radicalisation for Black people and communities thanks to the UK's move to build a class of immigrant elites? Maybe you can also speak about the difficulties in doing so because I'm sure even the children grew up with stark differences both generational and through class.

Michael La Rose

Indeed, the specific purpose post-1981 was to have a professional buffer with people who had something at stake to ameliorate the rebelliousness of the generation who demanded changes here in Britain. It is a strategy that has been successful in the past and especially during the decolonising and independence period. Within the colonising period, the empire chose one

ethnic group to promote, and the others to not give them everything that they should get. This immediately created ethnic tensions, which is a guarantee that there would be problems as soon as independence comes. This has happened everywhere in the world, in Asia, Africa, South America, wherever.

Now, you have all these politically Black populations pushing for change in Britain, against racism, for equality, and opportunity. The state then decides that they must open up the doors to everything if they want a buffer. Opening those doors doesn't mean it's open to everybody. It's open with a filter. They embedded conservative, less radical people at the forefront to show that things are better. The same thing happened with civil rights in the USA, with all these people on TV and adverts. They weren't part of the civil rights movement, but that's the nature of it.

What you have now is a stratification within these communities. The conservative middle class elements within those stratifications have an interest in maintaining those separations, those criticisms of each other. That weakens you. This is the period we're in now here in Britain. Our position is that we are bringing information and education about Britain to Britain, not just the Black population. We recognised our own similarities and positions within the white population and we should join up with them across all these ethnic groupings. That's what we did.

There was a movement of young Black people called the Black Studies Movement. They were demanding change in school. They wanted books about the whole picture, not just one part of the picture. Along with the white teachers, the radical teachers, they really put the state under pressure. The state came up with this thing called multicultural education as a way of control of all those things. Multicultural education depends on what you think and who you who are. It gives a kind of breathing space to try and work out how to deal with all these different groupings. The state only wanted certain books in their schools. They wanted Mary Seacole, but not Malcolm X. Although it appears multicultural, they didn't want anything to do with Black Power.

Adeena Mey

I suppose there must have been a renewed interest for your activities after Black Lives Matter. Now you see a trend in contemporary art to exhibit Black artists. A lot of it is good in terms of visibility, but I think it's also at the cost of more complex conversations around the relationships between race and aesthetics. A level of cultural stratification is also at work, which is not unsimilar to what you described regarding social and political struggles. What are your thoughts on that?

Michael La Rose

There came a period, during the Thatcher time, the Greater London Council (GLC) was taken over by white radicals. They told all the ethnic and radical groups that they would help us, fund us, and give us support. That changed the dynamic in Britain. That helped release and express a lot of creativity within the Black community, both politically and artistically. There were lots of exhibitions, on Black culture, art, music, all through the GLC period, allowing all our creativity to go into the mainstream.

But similar to the Portuguese-Mozambique saying *A luta continua* – the struggle continues. You win certain battles, but the thing doesn't radically change. It's not dismantled. It's reformed. Going through this period, there's a whole movement of artists during and post-GLC, who were exposed, such as Sonia Boyce and her generation of artists. Some of them are quite radical because they're not far from the movement. Today, it's not quite the same. Like the filters at the door I was talking about after 1981, there are filters now, such as whether or not we can get into the academy, and that's the reality of the situation. Others will take the kind of New Beacon path, which is to do it and organise yourself. This period is a good period for organising yourself, you can form your own website and social media, among other things. It's like the musical artists who don't sign with any label, but they become big stars because they do it themselves in their backyard or with their friends.

There's a different set of possibilities now. New Beacon had to up its game in early 2000s. Although we were part of three generations of movements, there was a newer generation whose activities are located within social media, not out in the streets. We had to connect with them. We were going to close actually, because of the economic pressure of Amazon and Kindle. There was no movement to fall back on or to support us. A new generation of people came to us, which includes my son and his wife who said that we should have a website, set up our social media presence, because if we didn't have these things, we would be invisible. With their help, we also refurbished the bookshop itself.

When Black Lives Matter 2020 happened, there was a qualitative difference in Britain. The earlier 2017 St. Louis Black Lives Matter movement was just replicated in England and didn't really take root here. All the problems that the BLM movement had in the US, they had here. They were openly absorbed and welcomed by the by the ruling class once they didn't ask people to go out in the streets and riot. 2020 was qualitatively different. UK's BLM 2020 was a mass movement generated by social media, but not necessarily led by Black Lives Matter. It was a movement where they organised whole demonstrations. Part of it was the toppling of the statue in Bristol, so there was a much more political focus specific to the UK. New Beacon now has a presence, people come to us for all the information about the struggles here. That didn't happen back in the St. Louis BLM period.

The problem with social media movements is that they don't have legs, they don't have stamina. At the end of the day, you've got to work on the ground and form organisations and

have arguments about which way you want to go, what's our policy, what's our position. It's much more difficult, but they kind of shy away from that, go on to the next thing, and then drop it when it's not so popular. That's a weakness of the present activists, but you learn from your bad experiences. Hopefully, they'll learn and have some feet on the ground. We are in touch with some people whom we let have meetings here because we know this space is also important to organise. We don't intervene, but sometimes I notice the title of their discussion, and I'll give them a few books to check out. They're not that many, but the facility here is for that. It may be overstated because it is really difficult to make that continuity from generation to generation. When I was a young activist, people with more experience would say that each generation has to make a decision about what they're committed to. They've got to pass that information, whatever they've experienced to the next generation because they got to continue, because it's not going to stop.