

Empire & The Slave Trade extension work

- *thinking about the nature & value of evidence*

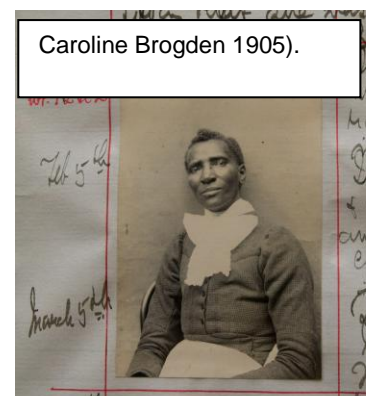


The Historian Caroline Bressey has done some interesting research - for example looking in the records of the charity Barnados. As well as running childrens' homes in the late 1800s they also ran an asylum for people with mental health difficulties in London, and it is these records that Dr Bressey has explored.

In the records she has found doctors' notes alongside photographs of many of the patients. Clearly this will help us understand Victorian attitudes to (and treatment of) mental health problems. These records also give us an insight into the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable members of Victorian society - people for whom there is often a limited amount of evidence. Some of the patients were black and asian and it is useful to explore their experiences - both in comparison to other patients and also within the wider context of the British Empire.

However, in her article 'the city of others', Dr Bressey also has something important to say about this EVIDENCE. Just how useful is this sort of evidence to Historians? And what are the limits to how much we can be certain of when using evidence of this sort? Read her article and see what she has to say...

The idea that the human face carries indelible signs of the real character and attributes of a person is an ancient belief, and looking at these portraits it is hard not to be seduced by the 'promise of knowing' that they offer. It is easier to read a sense of agency into some of the images than others. There are pictures in the collection (not shown here) that depict heads being held up by another's hands, ensuring they face the camera. Yet surely Anna covers her face with her hands to avoid our gaze, while Caroline Brogden's defiant stare challenges our right to judge her, or even to know her. When we connect with such images, when we meet the gaze of the sitters before us, the people in the images can 'live again in print as intensely as when their images were captured on the old dry plates of sixty years ago' or more. Despite the beauty and individuality captured by the lens it is important to remember that there are limits to the degree of understanding we can read into them. These images are not family photographs, but pictures taken as part of the 'task of constructing new forms of social inventory' throughout the nineteenth century.



Although a photograph can offer a promise of knowing a patient, casebook entries say more about medical practitioners, the system of asylum governance, and evolving psychiatric knowledge: 'the subaltern voice, the subject of it all — the patient' is herself a 'black hole in the centre of the archive'. Our knowledge of patient lives inside and outside the archives is limited. [The Historian] Roy Porter has shown how medical events, such as entry into an asylum, were complex social events that involved families and communities, as well as the sufferers and their physicians. These men and women were not solely defined by their experiences in the City of London Asylum. They had travelled, worked as clerks, porters, and labourers. They remained sisters, brothers, wives, husbands, friends, sons, and daughters.



Since some provision was made by asylums to return a pauper patient to his or her relatives or friends once they had satisfied the asylum that they would no longer be chargeable to any union and would be prevented from doing injury to themselves and others, it seems likely that the men and women who did leave the asylum returned to their working lives within the fabric of the city or beyond.

Yet, in pulling out these particular photographic stories from the archive books, they become dislocated from their supportive text and context. I have publicly revealed private lives and personal secrets, utilizing the power vested in me as a researcher to ignore, or to crush, Caroline Brogden's challenging stare. By digitally copying the records, cropping the images and representing the portraits in this format, I have created among them a new form of unity, one that underlines the categorization and institutionalization of their original form. There is a danger that through this reshaping these images will appear extraordinary or representative beyond their own singular case.

This new archive illustrates that diverse and extraordinary stories belonging to 'people of colour' are to be found within very ordinary archives among the records. These portraits and texts **pose other questions** of the cosmopolitan communities of London's East End. We need to consider and attempt to analyse the personal geographical biographies of the individuals depicted here...and the stories around them that we are yet to uncover.



Anna Brown



Emilv Lane 1900

Questions:

- 1) What is Dr Bressey saying about how far we can use this sort of evidence to make judgements about the past?
- 2) What does Dr Bressey mean when she says "there is a danger...that these images will appear extraordinary or representative beyond their own singular case"?
- 3) What questions would YOU like to pose about the people in this archive in order to uncover their stories? Or even of people beyond this archive- the "cosmopolitan communities" of London and the rest of the Empire?

