

BACK TO BLACK



Harlem 1934
by Edward Burra
(Tate)

Although often overlooked, inter-war London was host to fascinating spaces of cultural and ethnic diversity, particularly in music and the arts and in the East End, where Africans and Asians lived and worked as part of the multi-ethnic dock communities. Even less well known are the significant communities and individuals based in Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia and Soho where writers, students, activists and performers of African and Asian heritage lived and socialised.

Several black artists, writers and performers took part in the cosmopolitan groupings of London's artistic avant-garde, from the Bloomsbury Group and the "Bright Young People" to Chelsea-based artists. Though many formed important friendships and romantic and sexual relationships, black artists and performers were also exoticised and objectified, experiencing racism as well as celebrity within these circles.

Among the personal photographs and letters held at Tate Archives are records of some of the queer black figures within these spaces, who have often been marginalised or ignored in histories of the period. The archives of Edward Burra and Barbara Ker-Seymer hold a number of beautiful photographs of black actors and performers who worked in London during the 1920s and 1930s, including Jimmie Daniels and Edna Thomas. A selection of these images and documents are currently on display at Tate Britain as part of the spotlight display Spaces of Black Modernism.

In the early 1920s a friendship group formed amongst some Chelsea art-school students, which was to continue for several decades and was based partly on a shared love of jazz music, music halls and performance, as well as cinema, theatre and art; their friendships were also sustained through a mass of letter writing. The queer British artist Edward Burra arrived at Chelsea College of Art in 1921 at almost 16 years of age and became friends with fellow students Billy Chappell, Clover Pritchard and Barbara Ker-Seymer. This group has been documented in a biography of Burra by Jane Stevenson.

During the 1930s Ker-Seymer became an important and skilled modernist photographer, influenced by German expressionism. In the late

1920s she'd begun working as an assistant for the aristocratic photographer Olivia Wyndham. Soon afterwards they started seeing one another and Barbara moved into Olivia's Chelsea home at 19 King's Road. Here they socialised with upper-class lesbians such as the American heiress Ruth Baldwin and Dolly Wilde, Oscar Wilde's niece, along with others including Burra, who visited Ker-Seymer and Wyndham often. The couple lived close by Ruth Baldwin and her female partner Joe Carstairs, a wealthy motorboat racer. They also socialised with others in the "Bright Young People" group. In June 1930 author Evelyn Waugh recorded attending a Thames steam-boat party hosted by Olivia Wyndham and Ruth Baldwin, which he noted in his diary was attended by "masses of little lesbian tarts and joyboys".

During this period, Barbara was taking everyday snapshots of her circle of gay and lesbian friends, and pictured at different times in the 1920s and 1930s are black members of her social group, preserved either as loose photographs or within a series of personal scrapbooks. Among them is a small snap of a group of Barbara's friends (*shown, right*), where they sit and stand next to what appears to be a motorcar. Pictured in the photograph are Ruth Baldwin, probably Dolly Wilde and Barbara, along with two others including a woman of African heritage whose identity and biography we are currently trying to uncover.

By the late 1920s Barbara had become friends with the bisexual Grenadian cabaret entertainer Leslie Hutchinson and we have included one of her pocket book diaries from 1929 in our display, which includes an entry for a party given by Hutchinson. Black queer avant-garde figures based in Britain in the 1930s also appear in the Ker-Seymer archive. From the early 1930s Barbara became good friends with the African American gay entertainer and nightclub host Jimmie Daniels and his boyfriend Kenneth Macpherson, a Scottish modernist filmmaker and critic who earlier in 1930 had directed *Borderline*, a feature film starring Paul Robeson and Estanda Robeson. Daniels was born in Texas in 1908 and after training and working as a secretary in New York, he secured work on Broadway before moving on to professional singing. He went on

to tour all over Europe in the 1930s, including London from 1933 to 1934. Later in the 1930s Jimmie Daniels and Kenneth Macpherson moved to New York, where they socialised with individuals including Barbara's (by then) ex-girlfriend Olivia Wyndham and Olivia's girlfriend, African American Harlem Renaissance performer Edna Thomas. (Edna Thomas also appears in the Ker-Seymer photographic archive.) Edna was an actor who had lived in London for a time.

With this return to New York, Jimmie Daniels established himself as an influential entertainer and host of club nights, with sexually and racially diverse patrons. The photographs in the Tate Archive give us an insight into the personal, day-to-day relationship between Macpherson and Daniels, the holidays they took together, the friendship groups they were a part of, their love of music and performance, and Daniels' love of artistic expressionism in photography through the experimental poses he undertook for Barbara Ker-Seymer.

In Barbara's personal photo album from 1936 we also see that during the 1930s she was friends with singer, actress and performer Elisabeth Welch. Born in 1904, Elisabeth Welch was an American of African, Native American, Irish and Scottish heritage. Stephen Bourne's insightful biography of Welch records her experiences in 1930s London. During this time she performed in musicals and cabaret, and starred on radio, on television and in films alongside actors including Paul Robeson. She was good friends with Leslie Hutchinson, socialising with him, as she recalled, in "the marvellous late-night dives of Soho which, in those days, attracted all the stars and theatregoers". Welch is photographed by Ker-Seymer in a compelling series of solo portraits as well as informal snapshots with friends including Jimmie Daniels.

These stories do not reveal the full diversity of the queer black and white experience in the interwar period, particularly in regards to class. But the friendship networks revealed through the production and archiving of

GEMMA ROMAIN GOES INTO THE ARCHIVES TO DISCOVER THE QUEER BLACK ARTISTS AND PERFORMERS OF LONDON BETWEEN THE WARS

Everyday snapshots of Barbara Ker-Seymer's circle include black members of her social group

these personal and professional images do highlight some of the fascinating interwar experiences relating to art, politics, sexuality and identity as well as the presence of black queer life in interwar London, and the complex histories and personal interactions within LGBTQ life in general during the period. Much more is to be uncovered and documented, and exploring archives such as these is an important way to achieve the uncovering of marginalised histories. **•**

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Barbara Ker-Seymer's friend Elisabeth Welch, and (below), a photo found in Ker-Seymer's papers

