Alien Lunatics: epistolary constructions of post-war Black identity

This study examines how Black ex-servicemen and seamen stranded or left destitute in Liverpool after the first World War construct social belonging and exclusion through their letters to colonial institutions such as the Lord Mayor’s office. The data comes from Writing on the Wall, a digitised archive of letters and testimony written by soldiers and merchant seamen from Africa and the Caribbean, who had fought for England on land and sea during World War I. The work takes a Critical Discourse Analysis approach combined with Corpus tools in order to examine how these veterans reify and contest belonging in Liverpool. The examination of how participants see themselves in relation to the nation, offers an insider perspective on the way that migrants see themselves. The analysis will be in two sections: the first section examines the position of Black ex-servicemen in post war Liverpool from the perspective of identity negotiation. The letters showcase that despite fighting for England, they are regarded by people as outsiders, often referred to as ‘aliens’ and in some cases ‘alien lunatics’. This sense of failure and othering remain an important negotiation, particularly in asking assistance from the authorities. Secondly, the focus will be on national identity, initially from the perspective of citizenship choices, in examining the language soldiers use in positioning themselves according to national identity norms.

References:


Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.