



Emanuel School

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Monday 3rd - Friday 28th October

## WEDNESDAY

**Arshay Cooper**

Artie Dangour - Lower Sixth



## Brave Bessie - Live by the Plane, Die by the Plane

Mr DL Buxton

You may have heard of Amelia Earhart, but have you heard of Bessie Coleman?

Born in 1892 in Atlanta, Texas to African American and Cherokee parents, she was one of thirteen children. Bessie began school at 6 years old and had to walk 4 miles each morning to her segregated classroom - a distance equivalent to Clapham Junction to the far side of Hyde Park.

Even before adulthood, one can only imagine the barriers that she faced. In her early twenties, World War I broke out and she became inspired by stories of European women flying. Pilot schools in America, however, did not accept women, or 'blacks', so she saved up and learnt French whilst working full time at a nail salon in the hope of earning a licence from the renowned Fédération Aéronautique Internationale in Paris. At 29, she became the first African/Native American to earn an international aviation licence and returned to America, a media sensation. To achieve her dream of opening a pilot school for African Americans, she realised that she would have to earn money and thus, Queen Bess was born.

She quickly became a famous stunt flier, renowned

for her dare-devil manoeuvres - figure-eights and walking the wings. Although fixed on her dream, which would require money, she stuck to her principles and never capitalised on opportunities that didn't treat African Americans equally. For example, she resolutely refused to participate in aviation events that prohibited African Americans from attending and shunned a movie proposal which showed African Americans in a derogatory way.

She sadly passed away at the age of 34 in a plane accident, doing what she loved best. She never did live to see her pilot school open but inspired African American women pilots to form the Bessie Coleman Aviators Club. In 1931, the Challengers Pilots' Association of Chicago began a tradition of flying over her grave each year to commemorate her accomplishments and in 1995, the Bessie Coleman Stamp was issued.

In my eyes, Brave Bessie was an Olympic athlete in hurdling over her metaphorical barriers. I leave you with my favourite quote of hers: "You haven't lived until you've flown, the air is free from prejudice".



Arshay Cooper was a member of the first ever all black high school rowing team in the US. Cooper grew up on Chicago's Westside in the 1990s and he recalls street corners full of gangs, and hallways haunted by junkie "zombies". Cooper's journey to school was not easy. His school bus was known as the pickle jar because of the different gangs all in a small space. Cooper recounts that when a fight broke out in the pickle jar you had to hide under the seats to protect yourself. Cooper first discovered rowing after seeing a poster in the school lunch hall that read: 'Join the Crew.' Initially he was reluctant given that he didn't even know how to swim. Moreover, after being shown footage of the Olympic rowing squad in action, Cooper noticed that there were only white people racing. The next day the sign read: 'Join the Crew and get Free Pizza', and unsurprisingly most of the school, including Cooper signed up! Soon after, he met coach Alpert Ken, whose powerful welcoming speech enticed Cooper into persevering with the

sport when many of his peers told him to give it up. Cooper fell in love with rowing because it was a way for him to leave his neighbourhood and be at peace for a few hours a week. He said that the rowing was a way for the crew to overcome all the differences that they might have had, and that soon they all began to bond and work well together within the racing shell. Cooper's crew mainly competed against private schools and although they didn't always win, the Manley High School rowing team were the only people of colour competing and this in itself was an achievement. Cooper and his crew were able to overcome adversity and excel in a sport where they originally thought they did not belong. Arshay Cooper created a rowing legacy that is still in play today, bringing together communities from all around Westside and allowing them to enjoy and experience a wonderful sport.



# Black History Month

Tara Lyons - Governor

Black History Month is a chance to reflect, learn, discuss and celebrate. In fact at Emanuel School, the students and teachers engage in this at all times, through the important work of the Archer Group, a group I have had the pleasure to see in action on a number of occasions. In this month of reflection, I thought I would share the works of two very different artists who have and continue to inspire me:

## Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

Maya was a poet and influential civil rights campaigner in the United States. In 1969 she published *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* which is an autobiography of her early life which was extremely traumatic and is at the same time a metaphor for the struggles of Black America. She describes the cruelty that she suffered as a young black girl but tells a story of inspiring resilience and hope for everyone.



Maya Angelou

## Lubaina Himid

Lubaina Himid is a British artist who was born in Zanzibar in 1954. She is extremely influential and in June 2010 was appointed MBE for services to Black Women's Art and went on to win the Turner Prize in 2017. Lubaina's work focuses on themes of cultural identity and history. She is currently exhibiting at the Tate Modern which is a must see for all. The piece that stood out for me was "Le Rodeur: the exchange" which alludes to the horrific history of the French slave ship, *The Rodeur*, on which in 1819, an untreatable eye disease spread rapidly and whose cargo of slaves, no longer sellable, were thrown overboard.

Such a short piece of reflection does not do justice to the nature of the task in hand, but I hope it forms a small part of the school's engagement in all that Black History Month stands for.



Lubaina Himid

Lubaina Himid, *Le Rodeur: Exchange*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96".

## Caged Bird

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard

on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

