

‘Oral Histories of the Black Women’s Movement: The Heart of the Race.’ Reflections on a secondment to the Black Cultural Archives.

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Introduction

In 2017 I moved to London from Ireland to begin my doctoral research having been accepted to a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions research and training network of 15 students and associated supervisors. This consortium is titled ‘Critical Heritage Studies and the Future of Europe: Towards an integrated, interdisciplinary and transnational training model in cultural heritage research and management’ (CHEurope).¹ I am part of Work Package 3 ‘Digital heritage: The future role of heritage and archive collections in a digital world’ and supervised by Andrew Flinn and Julianne Nyhan at University College London. My own PhD research concerns the archival response to the current ‘decade of commemorations’ in Ireland, and the politics of heritage, gender and identity in this commemorative space.

A requirement of this PhD training in the relatively new field of Critical Heritage Studies is to complete a secondment at two different cultural heritage institutions, which were tentatively selected before I commenced my 3-year study. This is one of the benefits of being part of an EU-funded research consortium with a detailed and ambitious set of training targets. The idea of these placements is, for some, to do field-work and data collection directly related to their PhD research. For others it may provide a case study for working on their methodology and the skills required to carry out their own research. For everyone, it is an opportunity to gain valuable work experience and build professional relationships beyond the life of the PhD. The first such institution where I was to be hosted was the Black Cultural Archives. I would spend two days a week during July and August of 2018 working at the Black Cultural Archives, a community-based archive at Windrush Square in Brixton, London. Community archives are a manifest challenge to the ‘failings, absences and misrepresentations in mainstream archival and heritage institutions.’(Gilliland and Flinn, 2013, p. 2) They are ‘diverse, real world interventions into the field of local, regional and national even international archival and heritage narratives, often critical interventions, politically charged with notions of social justice and civil rights’(Gilliland and Flinn, 2013, p. 3). The Black Cultural Archives (BCA) was founded in 1981 and has since been ‘transformed into a professional archive that meets international quality standards’ while maintaining its community-based ethos. It is ‘a national institution dedicated to collecting, preserving and celebrating the histories of diverse people of African and Caribbean descent in Britain’(Black Cultural Archives, 2018a).

I was lucky enough in the first year of my PhD to have been studying alongside a historian and (at the time) former archivist of the BCA Hannah Ishmael, historian of Black Archives in Britain, with whom I have had so many exchanges about ethnicity, identity and racism in the UK and Ireland. I had surface level knowledge about race relations in 20th century Britain before moving to London. Like most students of history do in some form or another, I had studied transatlantic slavery, ‘the scramble for Africa,’ the US Civil Rights movement, and apartheid South Africa. It was perhaps the study of English literature and my own voracious reading of novels, centred mainly around US race relations, that made some of the most lasting

¹ CHEurope Project, <http://cheurope-project.eu/>

impressions upon me. My native Ireland is itself a former colony of the British Empire and so I have always been attuned to the ravages and legacy of imperialism. And as Ishmael points out, ‘any discussions of the British Empire must take account of how racial, cultural and gender differences are constructed’ (Ishmael, 2018, p. 3). I understood the racialised and sectarian prejudice directed at the Irish throughout our history of colonisation and mass emigration. Equally I have always been conscious of ‘race’ and racism in their true sense since a young age, it was always there – Ireland and Irish people are no different in their prejudices, though this is still underacknowledged. Nevertheless, the Ireland that reared and educated me was a far less ethnically plural society than it is today and so ‘racism’ was not a dominant conversation in my upbringing despite its actuality in Irish society, and because I was White.² I grew up instead with the images and news cycles of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and revelations of Church-State abuses in the Republic, both legacies in their own way of post-colonial identity politics and conservative State-building. Perhaps also I had allowed myself to be deluded by the narrative produced by what Tanisha Ford describes as ‘an archival project in which Britain positioned itself as a morally and racially enlightened nation that had ended its participation in the slave trade relatively early’ (Ford, 2017, p. 9). Feminism on the other hand was a more central analysis to me growing up in a country with a dark history of incarcerating women, a feminist consciousness that was for me, and still is, in a state of becoming. Second-wave feminism in Ireland was a battle waged particularly against the toxic relationship between the (Roman Catholic) Church and the State that operated to dispossess women of their full citizenship, identity and humanity since gaining independence from Britain in 1922. Having grown up with this reality, and indeed the Ferns Report, the Ryan Report and the McAleese Report, the many commissions of inquiry into the abuses and miseducation of women and children in 20th c. Ireland (The Ferns Commission, 2005; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Dept. of Justice and Equality, 2013), perhaps I felt somewhat well placed to understand such deep and disturbing institutional discrimination. Race, however, was a new and very different dimension to this that I had rarely come in contact with in great depth.

I quickly came to better understand race, racism and class in Britain once I began living here in 2017. Before moving, I had despaired at the great unmasking of prejudice and increased racial tensions in the wake of the Brexit vote.³ My first 12 months in the UK then coincided with a spate of terrorist attacks and Islamophobic tensions, the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and most notably where this oral history project is concerned, the Windrush scandal.⁴ This also happened to be a tumultuous time for gender relations in the UK and worldwide and it seemed

² Ireland largely did not experience mass immigration until the 1990s and 2000s during the prosperous ‘Celtic Tiger’ years, particularly from Eastern European but also African countries, along with increased applications for asylum. This wave of immigration and asylum seeking precipitated a referendum in 2004 to remove birth-right Irish citizenship, a reactionary referendum with racial overtones.

³ The British Home Office reported a 17% increase in recorded Hate Crimes in 2017 in England and Wales as well as spikes in the wake of Brexit and terrorist attacks. A huge 76% of the Hate Crimes recorded in the previous year to March were classed as racially motivated. See: ‘Hate crime surge linked to Brexit and 2017 terrorist attacks,’ *The Guardian*, 16 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/oct/16/hate-crime-brexit-terrorist-attacks-england-wales>; In 2019 a nationwide survey by Opinium showed a rise from 58% to 71% between 2016 and 2019 of people from ethnic minority backgrounds reporting racial discrimination, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/racism-on-the-rise-since-brexit-vote-nationwide-study-reveals>, accessed 21 May 2019.

⁴ In 2018 it emerged that the British Home Office had destroyed thousands of landing cards, the arrival records of many Afro-Caribbean migrants, known as the ‘Windrush Generation’ of the late-1940s to the early 1960s (the first such ship of migrants to arrive was called the *Empire Windrush*). These migrants were citizens of the United Kingdom under the British Nationality Act of 1948 and had lived as such in Britain for up to 50 years. With their original records of arrival destroyed they were subject to a hostile environment policy and in several cases deported.

strangely apt that I should be coming to this particular historical project given the contemporary climate.

The brief

My brief was to work on an oral history project at the BCA around the topic of the Black Women's Movement in Britain, which came about in response to racism *and* sexism experienced by women of African, Asian and Caribbean descent. A series of oral history interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2010 with over thirty women who were involved in the movement from the 1970s. The interviews were carried out by volunteers from the BCA and coordinated by Mia Morris, who was herself involved in the movement, and it was supported by a grant from The Heritage Lottery Fund. Titled *Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race*, the aim of the project first and foremost was to record and preserve the broad ranging experiences of the diverse women at the heart of a movement that is given little or no attention in mainstream British History. The movement for Black women's rights is also wholly overlooked in readings of Black Power and the wider Women's Liberation Movement in Britain. This collection of oral histories is catalogued and available to listen on-site at the BCA but more recently the BCA Digital Committee resolved to create a dedicated online space for the collection within the main BCA website. The intention is to generate more awareness about this important part of modern British history and to promote access and use of this invaluable collection. The website is also intended as a teaching and learning resource as part of a new university history module at Kings College London in partnership with the BCA.

Before starting my work at BCA, I read *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* after which the project is named and whose three authors were interviewed. The book synthesises the 'triple oppression of gender, race, and class' in a way that I had never understood 20th c. Britain before (Carby, 1982, p.211). It is an easy read in the sense that it is written in such a way that manages to communicate very complex and powerful things in a language that is accessible and compelling yet uncompromised in any way. Written as 'we, us' it becomes absorbing. The book was first published in 1985 but I was struck upon reading how familiar the issues it raised still sounded, for example when speaking of the rigged system of education and labour. In a broader sense, it presents an important and much more personal commentary on the existential crisis of post-coloniality in Britain through the prism of race *and* gender, which remains alive and well today. That racism was such a part of the legislative and social fabric of Britain - institutionally sanctioned, bureaucratically enforced - as recently as 1980 was nonetheless a revelation for me. I found in the interplay between the voice of the 1985 book and the voices of the women reflecting on the movement years later that some of the most arresting discussions were around mixed heritage and sexuality, and how their views had evolved with the times. This was clear particularly around the question of sexuality in terms of how it interacted with the organisational and political aspirations of the movement. Some reflected on their difficulties with the notion of 'feminism,' which was then considered the purview of White women and as yet considered by many too far removed from the pressing issues of the Black community. The women often struggled with their own views and identities and with those of their peers in a nascent movement and a very different social context, and they reflect on these struggles within and without more critically in the interviews.

Listening

'Your body is a battleground.' - (Kruger, 1989)

'Feminist standpoint methodologies should help us acknowledge, rather than refute, the privileged vertices some of us inhabit and how those vertices of privilege may or may not interact with areas in which we

are oppressed. They should help us own up to oppressor standpoints rather than appropriate oppressed standpoints that do not belong to us. - (Caswell, 2019, p. 12)

Unsurprisingly, various shades of racism emerge from the many testimonies, including along international lines. I was struck by one South African woman interviewed who, reflecting on her relocation, remembered her surprise at having left apartheid behind only to find a different kind of apartheid in Britain. Another, an African American woman, broaches the ‘the politics of beauty,’ and its relationship to both racism and capitalism. She comments on the greater availability of beauty and self-care products for Black women in the US: a consumer was a consumer, and the needs of Black women were as monetizable as those of White women (Phoenix, 2014); in Britain only the White standard of beauty was catered for, regardless of commercial opportunity. Something that was discussed more with regards to campaigning in the interviews was reproductive rights, whereas the book is harrowing on this point. I was horrified to learn of the forced sterilizations and damaging Depo Provera contraceptive administered to Black British women, how the control of reproduction produced such different effects between Black and White women. Undoubtedly this has stayed with me the most coming from a country that has proven morally conservative in the extreme where it concerned women’s bodies. The emotions for me were still raw on this subject having so recently voted in a generation defining referendum on reproductive rights at home in Ireland in May 2018. The completely opposite way that Black women’s fertility was controlled crystallised the race-gender-class analysis in a way that hit home for me personally as well as upending my understanding of one of the fundamental feminist plights. As Carby says ‘white feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. This compromises any feminist theory and practice founded on the notion of simple equality’(1982, p. 213). Though the movement for reproductive rights reform in Ireland did come to be understood as a class and racial issue, I had still largely come to understand ‘control’ of reproductive rights through the perspective of White privilege, but also through my own national context. Motherhood was regulated or stolen from many Irish women in different ways, through incarceration, forced adoptions and falsification of adoption certificates, infant mortality in Church-State institutions, and death by refusal of vital healthcare during pregnancy (Holland, 2012; Edwards, 2017; O’Loughlin and Specia, 2018). Systematic forced sterilization and what amounts to an attempt at social engineering was a new level of intervention I hadn’t thought possible in a comparatively more liberal Britain. Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski and Yula Burin (2014, p. 116) propose that ‘It is essential for us to see how the struggles we still face have been challenged in the past. We need to look back from a black feminist perspective.’ These women’s memories here archived remind us of, and challenge again, the violences visited upon the Black female body. As Cifor says ‘Oppression and its inequalities and injustices are often forms of trauma with deep emotional resonance’ (Cifor, 2016, p. 19). Caswell reminds us that there is ‘no singular voice engendered by similar experiences of oppression,’ and such nuances must be highlighted in a ‘feminist standpoint epistemology’ (Caswell, 2019, pp. 12–13). From such a standpoint, and recognising these vast differences, it was not hard for me in the end to understand something of these women’s battles, pain and frustration through my own historical context.

The work

Black British feminism for me has been about recognising, capturing, making visible and preserving what is important for us to collectively remember. Knowing that we can access these memories and archival records at the grassroots level means that we do not fetishize or reify what already exist in the archive.

- (Burin and Sowinski, 2014, p.117)

Much of the transcribing work, one of the most time-consuming aspects of making an oral history fully accessible and usable, was completed by the time I came onto the project. This had been carried out by paid volunteers from the community. I attended 3-4 meetings with the BCA archivist Abigail Wharne to discuss my research interests and how a useful exchange of my time and skills with the experience provided by the opportunity could be constructed. We discussed several different options ranging from file editing to re-writing the research guide for sources on the Black Women's Movement in the BCA's collections. In the end it was decided that I would work mainly on the interpretation of the oral histories, using my analysis and writing skills to assess the cogent themes and create informative text for the website. My tasks were inserted into a co-ordinated work plan for the project's completion involving several other staff and volunteers. I began by listening to the recordings of the three authors of *Heart of the Race*, Stella Dadzie, Suzanne Scafe and Beverly Bryan, and making notes on common themes across the three. Comparing notes, the themes I took from these were largely the same as what Abigail, the head archivist, and Munira Mohamed the learning manager, had interpreted. Next, I used these interviews and my readings of *Heart of the Race* and other sources to write the introductory text for the website. I was admittedly nervous about writing this. There was a huge amount of information to process and distil into a concise but informative piece on a subject I was very new to. Thankfully my training in History kicked in and the writing in the end came easier than expected. Nonetheless, I worried that I might leave something very important out and I was especially anxious to get the tone right. As a topic that requires sensitive reading for several reasons, I was apprehensive that I wasn't used to writing about something as loaded as race relations. And frankly, I felt uncomfortable as a White Irish person writing about Black British history. Tanisha Ford has reflected on her experience as an African American researcher 'finding Olive Morris in the archive,' uncertain about her authority in telling this woman's story as someone from outside the Brixton community (Ford, 2017, p. 5). I felt this kind of discomfort acutely. There is a quote by Linda Bellos painted large on the wall of the BCA book shop: 'I realised I had to know who I was otherwise somebody was going to tell me.' The point of this project is, after all, to tell the story of the Black women's movement as the women involved lived it, with their own voices. The methodology in creating this oral history collection was 'to present Black history by members of the Black community. To this end, the oral history interviews were undertaken by female, Black volunteers' (Black Cultural Archives, 2018b, p. 6). I felt, and still feel, very strongly about these women's stories, but it was not my history, not my heritage, not my identity. I was conscious of my positionality, of the ethical considerations about my White privilege within such a project. This was by far the greatest internal challenge for me, and it continues still. It was also a learning curve: if I am to continue working in the field of critical heritage then I will have to become more accustomed to working constructively with communities and identities very different to my own. To paraphrase Caswell, I will have to put myself outside my cultural comfort zone (2013, p. 285) and always actively critique my role and position within those relationships. White scholars are responsible for their own perceived discomfort. The reality is one of a constant, inequitable struggle faced by Black and ethnic minority communities in maintaining their archival heritage, perpetuated by precarious neoliberal funding models and definitions of 'value'. Indeed, well-funded universities and scholars have an urgent responsibility to question how they benefit from such models, and at whose expense. When engaging in such partnerships as the one I was part of, they should also ask how to form open and equitable relationships with these communities and institutions in ways that are supportive and sustainable rather than self-serving and self-congratulatory, entered into on equal, willing, and transparent understandings. After writing that introductory text I was, much more than I let on, enormously relieved at the approval of those working at BCA, such as Sarah Buntin, who reviewed the writing. Ultimately, I had to get over myself and concentrate on doing a good job, a white woman, listening (Carby, 1982).

Nevertheless, I did not and never will feel comfortable that it was me writing or doing any of this, however small the contribution, and not a Black female scholar from this community. I will take these lessons with me throughout my career.

The second task I set to was listening to the three authors again alongside the transcripts, this time extracting 5 to 6-minute sections worth of text tying in with the themes we had agreed on so far. Most of the extracts touched on 2 or more major themes and though we were not too concerned about having them neatly sliced we limited the tagging to up to three themes per excerpt. I took several extracts from the three *Heart of the Race* authors' interviews. For the remaining interviews I extracted a maximum of 2 sections, logging everything in a table with <themes> <author> <time codes> <text>. The interviews were semi-structured, varying greatly in how the topics developed. The conversation was therefore not always fruitful making it difficult to find suitable extracts in some cases. Furthermore, not all of the transcriptions were completed at the time. In some cases, interviews were being stored as two or more separate audio files and only the first half of some interviews had been fully transcribed. I knew from listening to one such recording that it contained truly fascinating and affecting testimony, but it was not possible for me to make a textual extract because the transcriber had perhaps not realised there was a second audio file to work on. One interview was in several truncated recordings, which presumably had something to do with the operation of the recorder by the interviewer. Some were transcribed but did not yet have time codes applied to the text, which was not a huge impediment, though it slowed the work sometimes in terms of synchronizing text and audio as I went along.

I then began putting together another table with short biographies of the women interviewed based mostly on the information in the interviews along with other sources. The volume of interview material reflected the panoply of activism these women were engaged in over the years, and it was a challenge to distil these into a short bio. I was also aware that these memories were not always accurate in the timelines they produced, which I could judge both from listening to the way the women were thinking out loud and from cross-checking where it was possible. Finding basic information proved difficult at times as some of the women interviewed are relatively well-known, such as former MP Dawn Butler, while others were more obscure, though well-known within the movement. Coming to this project somewhat *ad hoc* I was also not well read enough in this area to draw from my own knowledge of the subject and the people involved. Furthermore, the interviewing and transcription were not always uniform in the baseline information they recorded, or the questions asked. Often the interviewer passed over the initial statements for the record such as name, date of birth, date of interview, location etc. that ideally would be procedural standard for conducting oral history interviews, nor was this information consistently recorded in each transcript. Though there appeared to be questions or topics that were to form the basis of the interviews, or at least guide them, these were not always uniformly applied, or they developed in different ways. Not that it was necessary to stick to the letter of the questions as the interviews were semi-structured, but sometimes things needed more direction to help the interviewee along and to keep things on topic. None of the inconsistencies I encountered were insurmountable, but it did give me an idea of the issues that can arise in carrying out an oral history project and the huge task of coordination with limited time and resources.

The next step was to reassess and restructure the themes, after discussing them with Munira and Abigail. Having now listened to more of the women interviewed, I had a better sense of what was important to them and their analyses of the context in which they were working, which was also very personal. I amalgamated them into seven major themes, changing the wording of some to more accurately capture their meaning, and wrote some short text to introduce each of the themes. These final themes were, in no particular order, 'Identity,' 'Politics,' 'Sexual Politics,' 'Race and Ethnicity' 'Activism' and 'Culture.' Following this I edited

the themes I had tagged to the excerpts. Despite the number of interviews that I had listened to, and the heterogenous nature of their testimonies, their underlying themes in common surfaced clearly. After consulting with Abigail, we settled on attaching up to three thematic tags to the excerpts.

On my final day at BCA, I sifted through boxes of Stella Dadzie's donation to the archive to pick out documents to scan and include alongside the themes and excerpts. There were only two photographs in the boxes I looked through, one of the late Olive Morris and another, I believe, of Linda Bellos, putting a face to at least some of these disembodied voices I had listened to intently over the past two months, besides my own internet searches. As regards the archival documents, the draft and final constitution of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) stands out. So too does an elaborate hand-drawn and coloured 'Gender Monopoly' board game. This was intended to show the different limitations and expectations placed on women and men in the workplace, the message being that the game is rigged no matter how you roll the dice. It was a nice way to end my work at BCA, to see the raw materials of these women's work: essay drafts, scrawled notes from conferences, flyers, newspaper pages, education policy documents, all manner of records of their activities and development of their ideas. There is a latent energy and urgency in these archives, and this materiality helped my mind's eye further in imagining the extensive organising they had all talked about – I could almost imagine being at a meeting discussing young Black girls' education or labouring over a typewriter to hash out a polemic against discrimination. So much was written by typewriter – indeed, print culture was indispensable to their activities - which brought the historical nature of it all home. I knew from listening that these women juggled jobs, family, and myriad activist commitments, but the typewriter script and dully coloured paper reinforced again the sense of the hours of labour they gave over at a time before personal computers were commonplace. Such is the tactile, embodied and affective nature of archives as traces and witness that we can imagine and connect with a time, space and worldview not of our own making or experience (Cifor and Caswell, 2016).

Conclusion

...it is important to bear in mind that black or white, as we sit around tables having meetings together, planning activities and attending events, we are each other's witness to our own herstory.

- (Burin and Sowinski, 2014, p. 118)

Heart of the Race is the first feminist book I have read cover to cover and I am glad it was so. It is easy for me to tap into the white feminist zeitgeist all around me without needing to be too academic about it. A Black British perspective, as Burin and Sowinski (2014, p. 115) have noted, is conspicuously absent from mainstream feminist rhetoric. And if Black history is still a fringe subject matter, Black feminism is at the fringe of the fringe. Often, histories are not so much 'hidden' or 'forgotten,' rather we have not been willing to look for them or consider their agency and entanglements within received narratives. Hannah Ishmael's research in British Black-led archives has traced their lineages to Pan-Africanism⁵ and the work of African-American archivist Arthur Schomburg whose key ideas were 'the importance of archives and archival collections to the reclamation and remaking of history' and 'highlight the ways in which people of African descent were involved in their own liberation and activism' (Ishmael, 2018, pp.14-15). This collection tells a story of struggle, solidarity and self-actualisation, of cultural

⁵ Pan-Africanism is grounded in 'a desire for African-descended people to rediscover their history' and recognition of 'a common bond across the diaspora, particularly one that highlights the commonality of experiences as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the subsequent experiences of living under colonialism and imperialism' (Ishmael, 2018, p. 13). See also: Ishmael, H. 'The development of Black-led Archives in Britain' Doctoral Thesis (forthcoming).

renaissance and radical activism in 20th c. Britain. It is a vibrant and challenging herstory largely outside the mainstream of education and public discourse. It should be considered fundamental to the story of race relations, feminism and identity in Britain; it is a herstory that we are all poorer without.

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