

The Black Women's Movement



Ref. RC/PERIODIALS/162



Ref. MORRIS/3



Ref. PHOTOS/4

Background

When the *SS Empire Windrush* docked in Tilbury on the 22 June 1948 it was carrying 493 passengers, mainly male and one female stow-away, from Jamaica. By the 1950's equal numbers of women and men from all over the Empire were entering Britain in search of a better life. The contribution of women to the story of migration and the struggles of the Black community, however, has often been overlooked.

Immediately after the Second World War, Britain experienced an economic boom fuelled by Government spending and re-building after the War. To continue this boom the Government started to advertise for jobs in other parts of the Empire such as the Caribbean, which were suffering from lack of opportunities and poor infrastructure. Many took the opportunity to come to the "mother country" as under the 1948 British Nationality Act, anyone who was born in any part of the Empire was entitled to citizenship and the right to live in Britain.

The realities of life in Britain, for many, started as soon as they stepped onto land. The 'colour bar' meant that many found it difficult to find accommodation, and if they did it was often over-priced and sub-standard. This 'colour bar' extended into all aspects of social life and denied many access to the services and support afforded to the white holders of British citizenship.

The activism of the Black women's movement focused on, but was not limited to, the areas of work, health, education and organisation as set out in *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, a seminal book written by Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe on the Black women's movement up to the 1980s.

Work

Many of women who migrated from the Caribbean, Africa and the Indian sub-continent did so for economic reasons and for better job prospects. Upon arrival many women found that doors were closed to them due to racism and although skilled, had to find work where they could, in factories and for lower wages.

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One area of work which recruited many was the newly formed National Health Service as nurses. Although many were trained in the Caribbean they found a racial barrier which meant that many were forced into becoming State Enrolled Nurses (SEN) rather than the more qualified and better paid State Registered Nurses (SRN).

The area of work also had a knock on effect on childcare. With many women taking work due to economic constraints and the high unemployment rate amongst Black men, childcare became an issue. During the 1950's the Ministry of Health recommended that day care provision be refused to any woman who was going to work solely to supplement the family income. This made it difficult to find work, or limited the kinds of work they could do. Childminding was also expensive, and many ran the risk of sub-standard child-care.

Health

Another area of contention was the provision of health care. One critical issue, during the 1980s, was the prescription of Depo Provera, a contraceptive pill, which can have lasting side effects. This was prescribed to many women within the Black community on the erroneous basis that they were more promiscuous and required population control.

Another area of concern revolved around the promotion of Sickle Cell Anaemia which gained high profile status through the concerted efforts of Black women to raise awareness within the community.

Education

The Government gave schools little or no guidance on how to help students from the Caribbean adjust to life in Britain especially as many had to wait up to 8 years before they were re-united with their parents and would have needed a period of adjustment. As a result a large number were placed in ESN (educationally subnormal) schools, a move which concerned many parents.

Many children also faced hostility and discrimination not only from other pupils but also from teachers, which limited their desire to succeed. School material also reinforced negative ideas about Black people, for example showing them as "natives" or "primitive".

In response to this, women started to organise their own schools to challenge these racial assumptions. Many volunteered to start Saturday and Supplementary schools and others became teachers to try to balance out the racism and prejudice within the school systems.

Organisation

The preceding areas of activism culminated in the organisation of women to find ways of resisting. One of the most well known of these organisations was the 'Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent' (OWAAD), formed in 1978 and ran until 1983. One of the reasons for the formation of OWAAD was the difficulty of being taken seriously in the many of the other male dominated organisations. OWAAD encouraged the formation of satellite organisations and gave other Black women's organisations the impetus to grow, such as the Southall Black Women's Group.

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Black feminism was distinct from white feminism due to the triple burden facing many Black women of race, class and gender. Black feminists have argued that theirs is a very different experience and they face different issues to what white feminists (mainly middle class) face. On the key issues of family, patriarchy and reproduction, Black women have had different experiences and find that the idea of white feminism speaking for “all” marginalises and is incompatible with the reality.

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Timeline of the Black Women's Movement: Key Events

1958	Claudia Jones launches the West Indian Gazette, a campaigning Black newspaper. Born in Trinidad, Jones came to the UK in 1956, having spent some years in the USA where she became active in the Communist Party.
1965	<p>The 'Campaign Against Racial Discrimination' forms. American-born political activist, Selma James, becomes its first organising secretary.</p> <p>The 'Brixton's Black Women's Group' forms; it campaigns on many issues including racism in education provision and the discriminatory practice of the long term prescription of the contraceptive Depo Provera to Black women. They remain active until 1986.</p>
1973	<p>Founder member, Olive Morris, became active in the Black Panther movement and went on to campaign around many issues, including housing, education and policing. The 'Black Women's Co-operative' forms in Manchester.</p> <p>55,000 hospital ancillary workers – many of them Black women - strike for better wages and in opposition to the government's restrictive pay policy.</p>
1976	Workers at the Grunwick Film Processing factory in North West London strike against poor pay and conditions. Over 60% of strikers are women, who join the trade union APEX and are sacked as result. Led by Jayaben Desai, the strike becomes a cause célèbre for the trade union movement, and the fight for the right to join a union.
1978	Women involved in the African Students Union form the 'Organisation of Women of Africa and African Descent' (OWAAD). Six months later it changes its name to the 'Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent' (OWAAD) and focuses on issues affecting Black women in Britain. The group begin publishing a fortnightly newsletter <i>FOWAAD!</i>
1979	<p>300 women attend OWAAD's first national conference. It prompts the establishment of Black women's groups across London. Annual conferences take place until 1982.</p> <p>'Brixton's Black Women's Group' opens London's first Black Women's Centre.</p>
1979	<p>Asian and African - Caribbean women found the 'Southall Black Sisters' in North West London.</p> <p>OWAAD joins the campaign to scrap the SUS laws, which gave the police the powers of stop and search without any cause and was disproportionately used against young Black men.</p>
1982	<p><i>Outwrite</i>, a feminist women's newspaper reporting on Black and 'Third World' issues is launched; it remains in print until 1988.</p>
1982	<p>The first Black lesbian group forms in London.</p> <p>The 'Black Women's Working Group' is established as part of the Greater London Council's Women's Committee.</p>
1983	OWAAD conference is divided, in part by a debate on the role and relevance of feminism within the organisation: the organisation folds.

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	Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe write <i>The Heart of the Race</i> , a book documenting Black British women's post-war experiences, activism and organisations.
1985	Labour councillor Linda Bellos is elected leader of Lambeth Council, the first Black woman to hold such a position. 'Zami I', the first conference of Black lesbians is held in London.
1986	3000 women take part in the 'Women March against Male Violence' demonstration, organised by the 'Network of Women' – an alliance of 'Southall Black Sisters', 'Women Against Violence Against Women', members of 'Women's Aid' and individuals.
1987	Dianne Abbott becomes the first Black woman to be elected to the British parliament, representing Hackney North for the Labour party.
1989	'Women Against Fundamentalism' forms in defence of secularism and in opposition to the state funding of religious education and blasphemy laws.

“SOME OF US ARE BRAVE ... ALL OF US ARE STRONG”
an exhibition of images by and about Black women

13th Feb - 15th Mar 1986
 at the Black-Art Gallery
 225 Seven Sisters Road
 Finsbury Park N4

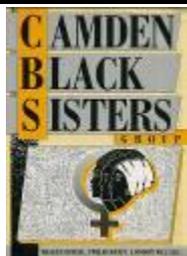
Private View
 Wednesday 12th ~~March~~ Feb
 8.00-10.00pm



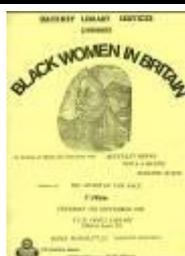
Ref. EPHEMERA/36/53

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Collections



Ref. PERIODICALS/45



Ref. EPHEMERA/36/10



Ref. PERIODICALS/132



Ref. MCKENLEY/7

3.1 Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race

(Ref. Oral/1)

As part of the Documenting the Archives project undertaken by Black Cultural Archives in 2007 and based on *The Heart Of The Race* by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe (Virago, 1985), which had examined Black women's lives in Britain using oral testimony, a series of over 30 oral history interviews were made.

The aim of the project was to collect testimony from a range of Black women involved in the movement for the rights of Black women in the UK, which covered activism, organising, campaigning and lobbying at a grassroots, national or international level.

Another aim was to ensure that the interviewees reflected as fully as possible the range of experiences, backgrounds and identifications of women within the movement and the different groups across the country that constituted it.

Many of the interviewees were involved in OWAAD or related groups. One of the methodologies behind the project was to present Black history by members of the Black community. To this end, the oral history interviews were undertaken by female, Black volunteers. The interviews took place between February and May 2009. There was some cross-over with the "Remembering Olive Morris" project, which included an oral history element.

3.2 The Runnymede Collection

The Runnymede Collection was transferred to BCA in 2011 and contains the library and archive of the Runnymede Trust, which was established in 1968. It has worked for four decades to challenge racial discrimination and promote a successful multi-ethnic Britain.

The Collections covers all aspects of race relations but of particular interest are the series on Black and Ethnic Minority Women (**RC/RF/23**), Health (**RC/RF/14**), Housing (**RC/RF/11**), Employment (**RC/RF/10/02/D**) and Education (**RC/RF/15/11**; **RC/RF/15/13**).

The Runnymede also has an extensive library and periodical collection. See "Periodicals" and "Further Reading" below for references.

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3.3 The Papers of Stella Dadzie

Stella Dadzie is a published writer and historian, best known for *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's lives in Britain*, which won the 1985 Martin Luther King Award for Literature.

Her career as a writer and education activist spans 25 years. She has written numerous publications and resources aimed at promoting an inclusive curriculum and good practice with black adult learners and other minorities.

She is well known within the UK for her contribution to tackling youth racism and working with racist perpetrators, and is a key contributor to the development of anti-racist strategies with schools, colleges and youth services.

Dadzie has been involved in a number of activities, and BCA holds **DADZIE/1** which contains many of the papers relating to OWAAD. This includes material relating to the minutes of OWAAD meetings and financial information and campaign material against the prescribing of Depo Provera, and raising awareness about Sickle Cell Anaemia.

The collection also contains material relating to Dadzie's political work with the African Red Family and African Student Union (**DADZIE/2**) and periodicals and ephemera collected by Dadzie in relation to her feminist and educational work (**DADZIE/5 and DADZIE/6**).

3.4 The Papers of Jan McKenley

Jan McKenley was born in Brixton in 1955. Her parents migrated to Britain from Jamaica. Her family moved to Manchester for five years then back to Tottenham, London.

McKenley was a feminist and applied for the co-ordinator post for the National Abortion Campaign at 374 Grays Inn Road the home to various feminist organisations.

Through her membership in the 'Brixton Women's Group', McKenley was involved in the 'Brixton Defence Campaign' following the Brixton uprisings in 1981.

McKenley continues to work in education, developing and implementing government policy. She has designed and delivered management and leadership development programmes for senior and middle leaders for over 20 years, these include the development of the SHINE leadership programme for aspiring head teachers from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds; she is the lead designer and facilitator of the Equal Access to Promotion programme run by the National Union of Teacher (NUT) and the National College of School Leadership (NCSL).

BCA holds her papers relating to the National Black Women's Conference (**MCKENLEY/1**) from 1979, papers relating to the Education Workshops of the Third OWAAD conference in 1981 (**MCKENLEY/2**) and papers relating to the 'Brixton Defence Campaign' (**MCKENLEY/3**).

The collection also contains periodicals and ephemera collected by McKenley that relate to immigration and education (**MCKENLEY/4-8**).

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3.5 Periodicals

BCA holds a large collection of publications and periodicals that feature national and grass roots publications. This series features over 100 periodicals from BCA's collection and the Runnymede. The following have a focus on women:

Runnymede (ref. RC/PERIODICALS)

The Runnymede Periodicals holds a wide range of journals, from *FOWAAD!* the newsletter of OWAAD (**RC/PERIODICALS/62**), to *Everywoman* (**RC/PERIODICALS/153**) and *Spare Rib: Black Women's Issue* (**RC/PERIODICALS/370**).

Periodicals

Periodicals of particular interest from BCA's collection are:

PERIODICALS/34: *Candice Magazine: for the woman of colour*

PERIODICALS/45: *Black Sista: A Camden Black Sisters Newsletter for Members*

PERIODICALS/52: *Mbaaku: Black Roof Womens Group*

PERIODICALS/75: *Celebrating Sisters*

PERIODICALS/126: *Executive Black Women; Black Women Writers*

PERIODICALS/132: *Black Bulletin* for the woman of culture; *Speak Out, Root: Newsletter of Peckham Black Women's Centre*, number 5; *Outwrite*, issues 14, 24; *Off Our Backs: A Women's News Journal*; *Diaspora: Women of Colour Defining our world*.

3.6 Olive Morris Collection

Olive Morris moved to South London from Jamaica in the 1960s. An inspiring community leader and grassroots political activist, she set up the Brixton Black Women's Group to tackle community issues that at the time were affecting local women and their children. Morris was a pivotal force in the squatters' rights campaigns of the seventies.

Morris was involved with political organisations such as the Black Panther Movement and later she joined a group of Marxist students at Manchester University (where she studied for three years). During that time she visited China, and was a founder member of OWAAD. Morris died tragically young at the age of 27.

BCA holds a number of original photographs of Olive Morris (**MORRIS/2**) and the Order of Service for her funeral. (**MORRIS/4**)

3.7 The Papers of Ansel Wong

Ansel Wong was born on 4 October 1945 in San Fernando, Trinidad & Tobago. In 1965 Wong arrived in the UK to attend Hull University, and in the early 1970s Wong was involved in the West Indian Students' Union/West Indian Students' Centre. He was chairman of the West Indian Students Union, edited a number of their publications and contributed articles. His arts organisation, the 'Black Arts Workshop', regularly held workshop sessions and staged productions with the support of the Union.

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During the 1970s Wong was also heavily involved in education activities and from 1974-1976 Wong sat on the Council for Community Relations in Lambeth, ILEA. The Ahfiwe School was a supplementary education scheme for which Wong was Education Co-coordinator.

Papers from the Wong collection that relate to the Black Women's movement include:

Lecture given at the Institute of Race Relations Conference on the *Impact of Minority Group Demands on Constitutions in Britain and the US: 'Women's Liberation and the Family: the Political Implications of Organisation at the Point of Reproduction'* by Sheila Rowbotham (6-7th February 1971) **(WONG/3/4)**.

Articles from the National Conference on the Rights of Black People in Britain including 'Black Women Want Freedom!', 'Black Sisters Speak Out' (22-23 May 1971) **(WONG/3/7)**.

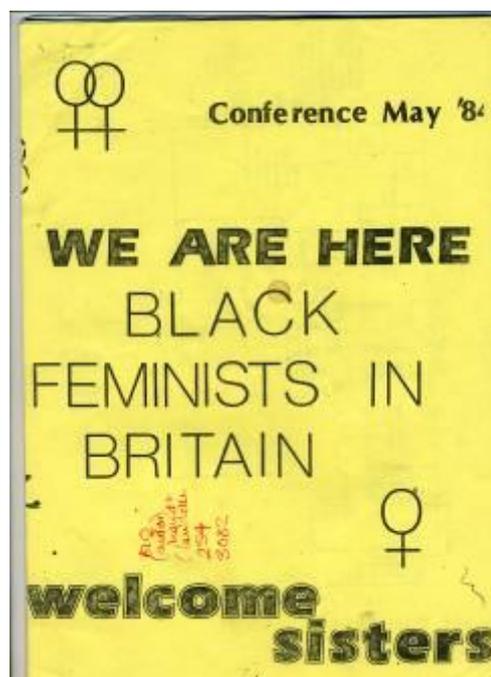
Papers relating to the Manchester Black Women's Forum (c. 1975) **(WONG/6/20)**.

Pamphlet by the Black Women's Action Committee of the Black Unity and Freedom Party, 'Black Women Speak Out' (1971) **(WONG/6/39)**.

Black Voice: newspaper of the 'Black Unity and Freedom Party' which includes an article on 'Male Chauvinism is Counter Revolutionary' about the attitude of Black men towards women, and 'Black Sisters Sacked' on a Black woman's experience working for International Personnel **(WONG/7/64)**.



Ref. DADZIE/1/8/3



Ref. DADZIE/1/8/4

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Further Reading

- *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe (London, 1985) **(Ref. 2.1B BRY)**.
- *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White*. (New York, 1990) Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite. **(Ref. 4.4A THI)**.
- *Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism*. Jenny Bourne. (London, 1984) **(Ref. 2.1B BOU)**.
- *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*. Vron Ware. (Verso, 1992) **(Ref. 2.1B WAR)**.
- *Debates and Issues in Feminist Research and Pedagogy: A Reader*. Edited by Janet Holland and Maud Blair with Sue Sheldon. (Clevedon, 1995) **(Ref. 5.5 HOL)**.
- *In Praise of the Anecdotal Woman: Motherhood and a Hidden Curriculum*. Jacqueline Andrews. (Oakhill: Trentham, 1994) **(Ref. 5.1 AND)**.
- 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood,' Hazel V. Carby in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London, 1982) **(Ref. 2.1 CEN)**.
- *Motherland: West Indian Women to Britain in the 1950s*. Elyse Dodgson (London, 1984) **(Ref. BB9)**.
- *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal: the Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain*. Bernard Coard (London, 1971). **(Ref. 5.10 COA)**

Books held elsewhere

- 'Challenging Imperial Feminism,' Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar in *Feminist Review* Special Issue, 17 (1984).

Other Sources

Greater Manchester County Record Office: GB124.DPA/1741 **Photographs Relating to the Manchester Black Women's Co-op**,
http://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/1062/archive_collections

Lambeth Archives: Papers of Olive Morris, IV/279
<http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/LeisureCulture/LocalHistory/>

London Metropolitan Archives: B10/069 Rukus! Federation Limited
 B08/211 Papers of Sybil Phoenix

Remembering Olive Collective: <http://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com>

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The Women's Library, for general information on the Women's Movement:

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collections/featuredcollections/womenslibrarylse.aspx>

Genesis portal: <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/genesis/>

Women's Resource Centre: <http://www.wrc.org.uk/>