

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

From December 2008 – March 2010 the project has collected the testimonies of Black women involved in the movement for the rights of Black women, including activism, organising, campaigning and lobbying at a grassroots, national or international level.

Themed around the seminal Black British feminist book 'The Heart Of The Race' by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe (Virago, 1985), which examined Black women's lives in Britain using oral testimony, it sought to interview the authors and original participants about their memories of the period and the impetus behind the book. Springing out from this, other women who were involved in the movement as documented by 'The Heart of the Race' (or as not documented by it) were interviewed about their activist experiences. To date the project has collected 32 oral testimonies from women that were involved in the Black Women's Movement.

Target Audience

Two types of target audience can be identified.

- The audience who we were keen to involve in the project – the volunteer interviewers and transcribers, and the interviewees
- The potential archive users that are interested in the recordings and transcriptions created by the volunteers. This audience includes scholars, women's organisations, schools, and local historians.

Aim

The aims of the project are as follows:

- To collect testimony from a range of Black women involved in the movement for the rights of Black women in the UK, including activism, organising, campaigning and lobbying at a grassroots, national or international level.
- To ensure that the interviewees participating in the project reflect 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
- To catalogue and preserve these testimonies and their transcripts, and make available access to them as part of the Black Cultural Archives' collection
- To train volunteers in oral history interviewing and transcription
- To hold an event, develop an exhibition and an online resource based on the testimonies collected, to inspire interest and debate
- To date little work has been done to document this movement. The project was a chance to gather together recollections of the women who were originally involved in the movement, to train volunteers in specific techniques, and to make available to researchers a story which is presently in demand.

Process

Our unique methodology stems from the ideas of the organisation to tell Black British history from a Black perspective. This means we were not afraid to collect what may be considered biased testimonies. Our methodology of Black women interviewing Black women meant the project focussed not only on historical content, but also on the stories they tell or share.

The project was guided by a Steering Group:

Maureen Roberts, London Metropolitan Archives/BCA trustee and chair of steering group

Ama Gueye, co-founder, East London Black Women's Organisation
Ego Ahaïwe, Lambeth Women's Project/Remembering Olive Collective
Dr Kimberly Springer, Lecturer in American Studies, King's College London & author of several books on African-American women's organisations including *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Duke University Press, 2005) and *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism* (New York University Press, 1999)
Heidi Mirza, Professor of Equalities in Education and author of *Black British Feminism*, Institute of Education
Gail Cameron, Curator, The Women's Library

Many of the interviewees were part of the Project Coordinator's existing network of contacts. This allowed for a more personal level of interaction for example when introducing volunteer interviewers to the interviewees. It meant the interviewee trusted the project.

The Project Co-ordinator collected CVs from all volunteers and regular monthly meetings were held that allowed her to get to know them individually. The meetings also allowed the volunteers to get to know each other facilitating group learning, and peer-to-peer support for those working in isolation. This familiarity on both sides of the project meant that the Project Co-ordinator could attempt to match interviewers to interviewees with whom they may have something in common with, and likewise transcribers to recorded interviews. For example, the Project Co-ordinator was able to give an NHS secretary an interview to transcribe that related to one interviewee's experiences in campaigning for action on Sickle Cell Anaemia. In her feedback the transcriber stated:

Participation in the project has reinforced my attitude that many people's contact with dominant state institutions may lead them to view these institutions as impersonal and rule bound because they do not acknowledge individual circumstances. <...> As a medical secretary in the NHS I have encountered patients who because of personal circumstances are not able to cooperate in their care management with service providers in a way that the latter would wish. <...> I hope that in my dealings with such patients I acknowledge this when acting as a liaison between them and medical personnel.

In making contact with the women involved in the movement, relationships have been formed between the organisation and the interviewees resulting in a number of them donating archival material to BCA, establishing a growing unique collection relevant to women's history. This contextualises the Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement collection and involves volunteers in a different part of the organisation.

Although all the interviewers were women of African descent, the pool of volunteers working on the project is very broad.

BCA recognises the importance of supporting volunteers, especially when working on a project that could potentially be emotionally demanding. The Project Co-ordinator, who worked in the BCA office two days a week, systematically made contact with all volunteers every week. This was done through a phone call or an email. All interviewers were introduced to their interviewee via email by the Project Co-ordinator previous to the day of the interview, and a mini-biography provided to give them some background.

The monthly meeting of the volunteers, organised by the Project Co-ordinator, has become a lively event with snacks and light refreshments provided. These occasions allow the volunteers to socialise, and discuss with each other what they have been working on, essential to transcribers whose work can be very isolated given they work from home and may not have much interaction with others regarding the project and the work they are

carrying out. A speaker relevant to the project, sometimes an interviewee, is invited to attend and share their thoughts and experiences with the volunteers. This session is recorded and will be made available as a supplementary resource. Speakers have included Dr Gail Lewis discussing education, and Jan McKenley talking about the importance of diaries and keeping a personal record. For interviewers this means the possibility to get to know the interviewee, for transcribers the possibility to put a face to a voice. The BCA collections team contribute to these events by choosing archival material relevant to the speaker's topic, this stimulates conversation within the group, and more importantly allows the volunteers to learn about the collections of the organisation they are giving their time to. In our feedback, one volunteer stated the following: "At the project's monthly meetings, volunteer transcribers and interviewers meet at the BCA to discuss how things have been going, whether they've had any issues, and what they are doing at that time. Guest speakers are invited, and at the November meeting one of the interviewees whose interview I had transcribed spoke to the group about her experiences. This is an excellent set up as it keeps us transcribers very much in human contact with the project and allows us to socialise with other volunteers and interviewees. At these meetings transcribers, archivists, interviewers and interviewees alike can all get a feel for the parts of the project they might not have the opportunity to find out about otherwise. The Christmas Party was a lot of fun too."

This familiarity with all participants of the BCA team contributes to the offices becoming a place that volunteers feel they can drop by and have a chat.

Number of participants

29 volunteers have been involved in interviewing and transcription, 32 women have been interviewed. The date for completion is the end of March 2010. Despite the project not yet being finished 7 archive readers have accessed the collections so far, once the project is completed the recordings will be made more widely available with audio files made available online, and detailed transcriptions for users to consult.

Impact and outcome

Impact on volunteers

Three training days were held, one for the volunteer interviewers, and as the project was extended, two were held for volunteer transcribers (which were also attended by the volunteer interviewers).

The first Oral History Training session covered: • What is Oral History? Significance of Oral History for community led projects. Interviewing skills: theoretical and practical examples, the dos and don'ts, active listening skills with a focus on feminist perspectives in oral history interviewing skills. Using an interview guide/topics. Ethics and copyright law: gaining consent, copyright obligations, duration of copyright, ethical guidelines for interviewers. How to record the interview: using the digital audio equipment, what to do before, during and after the interview. Health and Safety: the project's staff & interviewers' responsibilities.

The subsequent training days focussed on training volunteers in summarising, transcription, and digital audio editing. They covered: Transcribing and summarising: practical examples of creating summaries/full transcriptions. Introduction to life history data analysis. Digital audio editing taster session.

Some comments from volunteers on the value of the training given through the BCA project: I've gained oral history interviewing skills, including the technical skills of how to use the recording equipment and editing audio files. I have also learnt how to transcribe using the open source software ExpressScribe.

As an Oral Historian transcribing interviews gave me a greater understanding of how to conduct the interviews, in terms of speaking clearly, not talking over your interviewee and just generally creating an atmosphere that will relax the interviewee and result in a good interview.

When the feedback forms were returned it was also positive to hear that the project allowed experienced transcribers to refresh and enhance existing skills.

I have been transcribing/interviewing for quite a few years now so I didn't necessarily gain any new skills, but I was afforded the opportunity to refresh my skills.

My ability to summarise ideas and events, sometimes presented in a random form, in order to communicate main themes economically, has been enhanced by my work on the project <...> I have been introduced to and have learned how to use a new transcription software package.

BCA frequently supports volunteers in their undertaking of further education and employment. Staff related to the project have provided references for volunteers entering employment and further education on a number of occasions. An example of this include one member of staff involved in the project acting as a referee for a volunteer's application for the University College London's MA certificate in Records and Archives Management. Another member of staff has acted as a mentor, tutoring volunteers on composing successful job applications. The Collections Manager has also organised a series of talks for volunteers on entry points into heritage and information professions with the intention of encouraging Black and mixed race people to enter white dominated professions.

In the feedback we received volunteers cited how the project has aided them professionally: Participation in the project encouraged and probably helped me to get a job in the archive sector, working for my local council.

In addition to this, one volunteer interviewer is, with the support of Black Cultural Archives, awaiting the approval to present a paper on the project at the International Oral History Society Conference in Prague July 2010.

Impact on service

Volunteers have always played an enormous part in BCA, indeed it was founded by voluntary staff, and run by volunteers for the majority of its existence. However, the influx of volunteers this project brought into BCA forced the organisation to examine the way unpaid staff are managed. For example, in the past, BCA has relied on the generosity of volunteers to not claim copyright of their own work. The fact that the project involved creating recordings meant BCA had to research the multiple creator copyright issues related to recording interviews, and ensure all appropriate documentation was in place in order to be certain BCA owned the content of the interviews. BCA staff also drafted confidentiality statements, and volunteer registration forms stating the responsibilities of both Black Cultural Archives and the volunteer. As a result of this project Black Cultural Archives underwent an in-house evaluation of its volunteering strategy, and a formal one is now in place. As a result some of the volunteer interviewers and transcribers have gone on to volunteer with the Collections Team at Black Cultural Archives working with archival material.

Wider impact

The input of volunteers has been instrumental in creating a collection of oral history recordings that will serve as a record of the experiences of the women involved in a movement that has not been covered by mainstream historical publications. In this way, it is

a resource for the scholarly community, but also for the women involved in the movement, and the people involved in the campaigns that fed into it.

The training Black Cultural Archives staff and volunteers received as part of this project has allowed the organisation to act as a mentor for community initiatives and projects, and offer training in oral history techniques and transcribing. Recently this has included writing letters of support for funding applications, and advising other voluntary projects. Our work in this area has included support for a project named "The Changing Face of Tottenham" run by Ethos Consultancy Ltd.

Evaluation

A full evaluation has not yet been carried out on the project as it is not yet complete.

However, methods by which to evaluate the experiences of volunteers have been put in place, and questionnaires have been returned reflecting on their experiences. A questionnaire¹ was formed based on the ILFA General Learning Outcomes² in order to gain an idea of the different ways the project had affected the volunteers. The following details the questions and a summary of the responses.

What skills have you gained from participating in the project? For example, did you gain any technical knowledge?

I learned to transcribe using Express Scribe. I also learned how to write summaries, and how to format and present the final transcription to a professional standard. I realised what a responsibility transcribing is and how important it is to accurately represent the interviewee.

I have recently started a PhD on race related issues <...> At some point in the next three years I will need to transcribe my own interviews and feel that through the Oral Histories project I have already received comprehensive training for this.

This question regards knowledge gained from the experience. Did you learn about any particular topics/about working in the archive sector/about how the past relates to the present?

That it is important to record the experiences of all groups within a society because they all play a part in shaping that society.

1 See Appendix A

2 <http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/>

3 Full feedback forms available on request

The oral history interviews I've conducted have been very informative and have helped me understand a lot about the sort of work and activism that black women were engaging in a few decades back and how this relates to the work that most of them are doing now professionally. On the other hand, I have learnt about the importance of preserving the past (of archiving and documenting it) and how this relates to the need of documenting the present.

I definitely learned a great deal about the women's movement in the UK. I have read about it, but to hear firsthand accounts of that period in time was both fascinating and informative. It put a face on and gave a voice to history that I might not have had otherwise.

Do you feel participation has impacted on you personally? If so, how?

I would say that I was definitely energized to be more active in civil rights work. It is easy to regard persons who have dedicated their lives to such work as being so exceptional that you forget that they are just humans with passion and commitment, things that we can all do.

At a professional level it reinforces the importance of tenacity and hard work in order to realise your dearly held aspirations. On a practical level it gave me some insights on the value of creating a networked organisation and the value of having the skills to facilitate

cultural change.

The project has enhanced my awareness of black feminist history in the UK and allowed me to meet a huge variety of extremely interesting people.

It was interesting to learn and to hear how others dealt with their personal experiences and was gratified by the extent to which they were prepared to share this level of intimacy. I do feel truly privileged having been a small part of the project.

Has participating inspired you to go on to learn/create/participate in new projects/ initiate new projects? If so, please provide details. This could be in your personal or professional life.

Participation in the project encouraged and probably helped me to get a job in the archive sector, working for my local council. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience and found the individual oral histories inspirational and rewarding to transcribe.

Before I started volunteering for the BCA, I was already involved in other projects – some of which I am still working on. However, I would say the experience and skills I've gained from the BCA will definitely be of great use for any future work I do on similar projects.

My knowledge concerning the position of minority communities in relation to dominant communities and the work that has to be undertaken to gain the same rights as accepted citizens has been enhanced by my participation in the project.<...> I hope this will inform my studies as a student of Social Sciences with the Open University.

In my current training at Vauxhall College I am studying Radio Production I am seriously looking at how this can be incorporated in daily broadcasting as an educational tools for young families, schools, etc.

I have begun speaking to my friends about being more active in community work. Thus far this has manifested in organizing donations for the recent earthquake in Haiti. This project has opened up a new world to me with all its joys and complexities, it encourages me initiate and lead projects that are dear to me.

I would love to work on an Oral History project in a professional capacity as an Oral Historian or Researcher. My work on the project has inspired me to continue the work of recording people's stories – and it has confirmed my belief that everyone has a story to tell.

The volunteers had an enormous input into this project. Their dedication did not just apply to their interviewing and transcription duties, they were also integral to the planning and delivery of an event BCA held to celebrate the project. The staff responsible for the project understood that volunteers have personal lives, and that what life throws at them may affect their ability to give us time. We tried to alleviate any detrimental effect this might have on the project by having the Project Co-ordinator in the office two days a week. The Project Co-ordinator developed good relationships with the volunteers and had a system by which to contact volunteers every week in order to monitor the rate at which transcriptions were being completed, and to find out quickly if people couldn't carry on so that new volunteers could be recruited and trained. The Project Co-ordinator was also conscientious about the security of volunteers, she made sure that they telephoned her when they arrived at an interview, and afterwards.

Stemming from the project a study day was held with The Women's Library at the beginning of March 2010. Titled The Heart of the Race: Black feminism in Britain the day provided an overview of the rise of black British feminism in the 1970s, drawing on the oral history project. The day considered the significance of the movement, and reflected on how grassroots Black and Asian women's movement became important to an emerging Black British feminist consciousness. Speakers included author Stella Dadzie; Amrit Wilson (University of London); Professor Heidi Mirza (Institute of Education, University of London); and Sheila Rhuiz and Ego Ahiawe, (Remembering Olive Morris Collective) amongst others. The day attracted over 100 participants and the audience included individuals who had travelled from as far away as Sweden to attend. Although a formal evaluation will take place shortly, feedback received about the event so far includes the following comment.

Just to say, that was an excellent event - kudos to you and everyone involved in its planning. The quality of lectures and the friendliness and enthusiasm with which it was all executed was of a much higher standard than any of the previous, dry academic events related to racism that I've attended.

A portable exhibition is already in the process of being created, and the audio recordings will accompany this. There are also possibilities to collaborate with other community organisations and develop teaching resources. The Project Co-ordinator and the Programme Manager spoke recently about the project at a two day V&A symposium "From Margins to the Core: An international conference exploring the shifting roles and increasing significance of diversity and equality in contemporary museum and heritage policy and practice."

Tips

Difficulties were experienced in convening the Steering Group regularly, particularly when the project was extended. The success of a project is a blessing but can also present problems. If there is a possibility of extending a project, it may be wise to inform Steering Groups and the like when this is under discussion. It may be necessary to recruit new members if people decide to step down for whatever reason.

Future development

Volunteers

A number of the volunteers have become involved in other projects the organisation is running. Some have continued their volunteering through cataloguing the collections. Black Cultural Archives' volunteer strategy is being enhanced in line with advice from

Volunteering England.

Collections

The project has not only developed BCA's volunteer workforce, but the resulting collection of oral history recordings can be drawn upon for teaching and learning purposes covering a wide variety of subjects. There is potential to build upon the project and create additional recordings by forming partnerships with community organisations.

Training

The training BCA benefitted from as part of this project expands the organisational skills base. This means the organisation can offer training to other community initiatives, as well as cascading when new team members join. Not only has the organisation gained a valuable set of skills, but the relevant policies and procedures are also now in place for the occasion when BCA embarks on another oral history based project.

Project website :

<http://heartoftherace.blogspot.com/>

Case study record created on:

24/05/2010

Institution:

Black Cultural Archives (BCA)

Key partners:

Black Cultural Archives (BCA) had no partners in this project, however we worked in collaboration with Remembering Olive Collective (ROC) on sharing interview contacts, and The Women's Library on delivering study days and seminars.

Start date:

November 2008

End date:

March 2010

Contact:

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Domains:

Archives

Sector developing role:

Advice
Partnerships
Policy
Research and Evidence

Social groups:

Ethnic minority groups

Social outcomes:

Community cohesion & inclusion
Learning & skills
Community empowerment & active citizenship
Raising participation

Geographical Coverage:

London