Haringey – Context and Crucible

This talk was given at the Launch of Haringey Women's History Month in Bruce Castle Museum, in March 2020.

It is thirty-odd years since my first invitation to speak at Bruce Castle Museum and it's good to know that with all the demographic and social changes in the borough, black women's lives and struggles not only remain on Haringey's agenda but are a focus of this launch of Women's History Month.

I have lived and worked in Haringey for nearly fifty years, for most of my adult life in fact. First, in the mid-seventies as a newly qualified German teacher – the first black staff member at Creighton (now Fortismere) School, where at the time the only other black faces on the staff were cleaners or 'dinner ladies'. Then as teacher-in-charge of an 'Intermediate Treatment' unit for young offenders based at 628 Green Lanes, where children considered at risk of re-offending were referred. On my first day in the job, I remember being challenged by a fifteen-year-old boy, a skinhead and young National Front supporter who, on learning I was to be their new teacher, greeted me with the comment '*well, I fucking hate niggers!*' Eventually I got to know him better. Something I said must have changed his mind, because years later a colleague saw him arguing vehemently with a policeman at Tottenham nick for arresting of one of his black mates in the round-ups following the Broadwater Farm uprising in 1985.

After giving birth to my son in 1980, I became a lecturer in Tottenham College of Technology's Community Service Unit, where we set up courses for local people who could not gain

access to the male-orientated technical college up the road. There is something about working from the margins that can be truly empowering. We ran courses for the unemployed, courses for black women, courses for people with disabilities or individual learning needs. Black Studies (euphemistically called 'History & Popular Culture') was central to the curriculum. We also established the first crèche for preschool children in Further Education, so that our women students, many of whom were young mothers, could access our provision. They arrived wanting to learn how to type, and left with dreams of becoming astronauts or brain surgeons.

From the mid 80s, I became Head of Educational Guidance at Haringey College, which, in its early days, provided a genuinely alternative Community College catering for Haringey's diverse local population. In those heady days, when all the media could talk about was 'Barmy Bernie'* and Haringey's 'Loony Left', the College was seen as Haringey's flagship. It was members of the local West Indian Leadership Committee who spotted how much less I was being paid than my white colleagues. Despite their representations to the Chief Education Officer, the issue was never resolved, but that's a glass ceiling story for another day.

Finally, after quitting and setting up my own Equalities training company in the late eighties, my evening and weekend job for the next fifteen years was as a fitness instructor, working out of White Hart Lane, Tottenham Green, the YMCA in Crouch End and various other local gyms. So one way or another, I have taught or encountered generations of Haringey residents, many of them women – some of whom, I'm pleased to see, are here tonight.

Haringey is the place where I first became a Union rep for the National Union of Teachers, as it fought for teachers' rights, higher wages and better conditions of service. It's the place where I first demonstrated against cuts to public services, teaching my young son to chant 'Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, Out, Out, Out!' as we waved our placards outside Wood Green Civic Centre. It's also the place where I joined UBWAG, the United Black Women's Action Group, and had my first real taste of political activism, organising

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* 'Barmy Bernie' refers to Bernie Grant, a Haringey councillor at the time, who went on to become one of Britain's first black MPs.

with other black women in the local community to challenge police harassment, educational disadvantage and a range of other injustices and inequalities.

In 1979, our women's group set up the Haringey Black Pressure Group on Education, lobbying the council and demonstrating outside local schools against policies and practices that threatened our children's achievement, such as the disproportionate number of school exclusions, and the Council's plans to set up 'sin bins' for its more 'disruptive' pupils. We also helped to set up a Supplementary School in the Community Centre on West Green Rd.

It was in Haringey that I experienced one of my first experiences of successful campaigning, against the Black Boy pub on West Green Rd. Much to our amazement, it removed the offensive sign of a grass-skirted piccaninny when we pointed out that our children had to pass it daily on their way to school, replacing it with a picture of a black horse.*

Finally, it was in Haringey that I co-wrote *The Heart of the Race*, in collaboration with Beverley Bryan and Suzanne Scafe, a book which chronicles the lives and 'herstory' of black women in Britain, which was recently republished by Verso as a feminist classic. So I owe a huge debt of gratitude to this borough, which has served as both backdrop and crucible to my personal, professional and political development.

My brief this evening is to focus on *The Heart of the Race* and its continuing relevance, but I felt it was important to begin by acknowledging this context. Because it was my early experiences of local activism, in the mid to late 70s, that drew me to women in other communities like Brixton, Southall and Moss Side, who shared similar concerns. This, in turn, led to the formation of OWAAD (the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent), a national umbrella organisation that brought black and brown women together from across the country to articulate, coordinate and highlight our specific concerns.

We had quite a list. Concerns about the SUS laws, which led so many black young people into conflict with local police. Concerns

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* For more information about this campaign, see https://davidjesudason.substack.com/p/the-black-boy-pub-sign-tottenham

about the disproportionate number of black deaths in police custody. Concerns about the inadequate treatment of people with Sickle Cell Anaemia; concerns about the targetted use of the injectable contraceptive Depo Provera to limit pregnancies among working class women, both black and white. And it's important to remember that these struggles and campaigns developed in a context of heightened black activism, not just in the UK but across the globe – the Civil Rights movement in the US, the Anti-Apartheid struggle in SA, anti-colonial struggles across the African continent and elsewhere; and the rise of the Black Panthers, of course, with their inspirational message of self-education, self-help and self-reliance.

Another important context was the emergence of the Women's Movement with its focus on women's inequality and its demands for women's rights. Debates about the meaning and practice of Feminism were central to the way black women framed their campaigns, even as we formulated our equally pressing demands for black civil rights. As black women we straddled the interface between race, gender and class, so we had to respond ways that did justice to all three.

The Heart of the Race, first published by Virago in 1985, was our attempt to document these struggles in a way that acknowledged the long history of slavery and colonialism that led us to Britain's shores. We wanted to show how these twin evils had affected the lives of generations of African women, particularly in the Caribbean – citizens of the Mother Country, drawn by the lure of streets paved with gold and Enoch Powell's explicit invitation*.

Another priority for us was to end centuries of silence by giving black women a voice, something we achieved by interviewing over one hundred women about their lives and experiences, at a time when oral history was looked down upon. As the book's recent republication suggests, the testimonies of these women about their experiences of work, education, health care, welfare services, political activism and men, alongside our analysis of the social and economic context, are as relevant today as they ever were. Perhaps

* Despite his anti-immigration rhetoric, Enoch Powell is alleged to have recruited Commonwealth immigrants to work in the NHS, when he was Minister of Health in the early 1960s.

even more so, since our experiences resonate with women from so many other areas of the world who have come here as migrants, refugees or cheap imported labour.

As feminists, womanists, activists or simply as survivors, black women have much to be proud of, much that we can build on. But we can only do this if we remember where we have come from and have a clear sense of where we wish to go. This is precisely why Women's History Month and celebrations like this are so important. Each and every one of us is here today because of something someone did before we came. For black women, like everyone else, knowing our history is vital, both to our sense of who we are and our sense of what we can achieve. In these times of hair-tearing political discord and confusion, not to mention the ticking clock of climate change, it is sometimes hard to feel optimistic about the future. Yet our recent history shows that when we unite around our common concerns and draw on our unique strengths as women at the heart of our communities, we can move mountains.