sister to sister: developing a black British feminist archival consciousness

Yula Burin and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski

We began our conversation with anger about the loss of a particular project, and we had begun to reflect on what that meant for our communities and for us as individuals ... In this article we explore some of our experiences within feminism over the last decade, our experiences as black women working in grassroots organisations and on the frontline, and through this we explore our connection to our black British feminist heritage and our understanding of activism. We have chosen to take an autoethnographical approach to our piece, following the black feminist tradition of describing what we think in regard to our condition, reflecting on it and using that reflection as a basis for change.

Amos and Parmar (1984: 4) state that ‘accounting for their historical and contemporary position does, in itself, challenge the use of some of the central categories and assumptions of recent feminist thought’. We know that the work is already under way, for black women are ‘not only making history but rewriting it’ (ibid.). This work of recording our experience, as Amos and Parmar assert, is crucial ‘for us Black women, for our experience is the shared experience of Black people, but it is also the shared experience of women within different class contexts. Our political responses have been and will always be shaped by that duality …’ (ibid.: 5).

in the beginning

After meeting some years ago at an event called ‘Feminism in London’ in 2009, we exchanged email addresses and on a sheet of paper we wrote the words ‘black feminist group’. Our experience on that day informed us that there was definitely a need for a ‘black feminist group’. Yula later went on to be a founding member of Black Feminists UK. Our paths crossed over the years, mainly at the Feminist Library where we had both volunteered and completed the Radical Librarians for Tomorrow course. In conversations with Gail Chester
at the library we discussed our concerns about the preservation of our feminist organisations (Lambeth Women’s Project (LWP), Cinenova, distributor of women’s films, and the Feminist Library). We were very much aware of the change of climate and the precariousness of our roles within these organisations. Yula volunteered at the Feminist Library after completing the training, and eventually became a member of the management collective. Yula reflects:

In our discussions, it becomes apparent that I am still coming to terms with, and seeking to understand, my experience of being involved with the Feminist Library. On reflection, I recognise the value and importance of a place like the Feminist Library existing, how necessary it is that it continues to do so. I am mindful of the role that feminist libraries and archives need to play with regard to the preservation of our herstories, but that work of preservation requires resources of time, energy, money and infrastructure. When we lack these, we hasten the degradation and deterioration of the materials and documents we have thus far managed to retain in our feminist libraries and archives. In this kind of climate, we increase the likelihood of the disappearance of our activist herstories. We need to remedy this situation.

black feminists at work: LWP

LWP was established in 1979 through the activism of women involved in the Women’s Liberation Movement and was one of the oldest projects of its kind in the United Kingdom. It was a women’s space with a remit to provide a range of activities and services for the benefit of girls and women living in the south London borough of Lambeth and beyond. One of the main objectives was to provide meeting, office and event space for a range of women’s groups. In recent years this has included meetings and event spaces for the Remembering Olive Morris Collective;1 Million Women Rise; Black Feminists UK’s first public event; Muslim Sisters Jaamat; Eritrean Women’s Action for Development; and Black Deaf Sisters. The range and diversity of this small sample of women’s organisations using LWP’s premises is indicative of its importance as a space where black women could gather together to organise for social and political change, particularly with respect to fighting against our multiple oppressions. The range of organisations—whether their stated purpose was to effect a herstorical examination and celebration of one black woman’s political activism in Brixton, or organising an annual march of women in central London to protest against male violence against women and girls—demonstrates how LWP was able to accommodate this broad spectrum of black feminist groups. It was a crucible for black feminist transformations. And now it has gone.

The building that housed LWP had been in a state of disrepair for a number of years, and after a protracted negotiation with the neighbouring Stockwell Primary School, a shared agreement was reached regarding refurbishment and the terms and conditions governing LWP’s return to the building in 2011. As part of this shared agreement, Stockwell Primary School was designated the manager of the

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building by Lambeth Council. Many women had been concerned with the idea of entering into a shared agreement as there had been a long history of the school laying claims to the building. We trusted in the process, though the research of Nazmia Jamal at this time had revealed that decisions had been made about this agreement by Lambeth Council and the school—without the knowledge of LWP and without LWP being part of the decision-making process. The discovery of these documents made it easier for LWP to put pressure on local government and councillors to ensure that an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was undertaken. The EIA was supposed to be the process that looked at the impact of the decisions being made by local government, to ensure that LWP was actually part of the decision-making process, and to ensure that there was equality in the monitoring process for both LWP and the school. Unfortunately, Lambeth Council never adhered to the recommendations of the EIA.

LWP’s ability to function effectively was seriously impeded by the school’s concern about safeguarding issues. In effect, it became impossible for the project to continue delivering services to women, particularly counselling and provisions focusing on domestic violence, because service users were required to access the project via the school and not through LWP directly. Women could not get into the project through LWP’s own front door. The flashpoint occurred at the end of May 2012, just before the extra-long Diamond Jubilee Bank Holiday, when the school gave LWP two weeks to vacate the building that had been its home for decades. It was then that the final campaign to save LWP began. Lasting for three months, the campaign consisted of pot-banging in Windrush Square (in Brixton), a sit-in, and reports in local and London-wide press. We resolved that if the project had to close we would not go quietly. LWP closed its doors for the last time in November 2012. It was Yula’s words that sounded the bell that there was trouble on the horizon.²

It was at the LWP that we had the opportunity to really talk and explore our experiences with other Black women of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Those times were special: so many conversations, so many women who were part of the project. LWP provided a space for our experience of everyday feminism in a way that was different from our experiences in the mainstream. LWP was a women-only space ‘for women by women’. It was a hub where we could share and receive information on a number of issues; it was a safe space to reflect. It was an accessible space to incubate our ideas and develop our creative expression and critical thinking; we could be autonomous. We recognise that the relationships we developed with other black women while at the project were qualitatively different from our relationships with women in other feminist arenas.

Ego had volunteered there for thirteen years in a variety of roles; for three of those years she was a paid young women’s worker. Yula was also a volunteer at the project, providing cover for the regular counselling sessions from September 2011

to the end of the project. It was during one of the most crucial and challenging periods of the project’s history that we gained the opportunity to really talk about and explore our experiences. Ego reflects:

It was certainly Yula’s words that kicked off the final ‘Save LWP Campaign’. Her words reached far and wide, and this was especially important since it was a time when I could not find the words myself. In that moment, I was far too taken with disbelief and conflicting emotions because of the actions of the neighbouring primary school that had decided to evict the project after years of negotiation and refurbishment. What is more, this was only eight months into the project’s return to the newly refurbished building after women had had to operate and deliver services out of a rotting one for so long. We were beginning to settle in and see the real potential, and we were getting ready to celebrate thirty five years of existence. The potential was clear, and we had a chance to have a taste with, for example, the Herstories sessions—a programme developed by Pan Africanist, Dr Ama Biney in October 2011 and March 2012.

intersecting feminisms

So, the Past is Prologue. This is how we attempt to bring our Black British feminist journeys and experiences thus far into the narrative. The ‘duality’ referred to by Amos and Parmar has not changed. Mainstream feminist thought, we would say in our experience, is conscious of cultural difference on a theoretical level but there is still a sense of the unspoken among us. In recent years, involvement with a variety of projects has increased our interest in the preservation of Black British feminism, as well as in issues around how we collate, identify and make decisions about what we keep in regard to our activities, while making sure we think about it in practical terms.

At Feminism in London 2009, Ego had been part of the ‘Racism and Sexism’ panel; she had spoken about Olive Morris, the Brixton-based activist and Black Panther, and about the ‘Remembering Olive Morris’ project. She had spoken about the importance of memory and remembering, and specifically about the role that archives have to play within that. A key question underlying Ego’s intervention was: ‘Who’s archiving and why, and for whom?’ Responses to her presentation and activities and discussions at other feminist events during this period seemed to demonstrate that a black British perspective continues to be absent from mainstream feminist rhetoric. Statements and responses from attendees and organisers on the Race, Identity and Privilege online page address in detail what occurred during the Bristol workshops that took place in the same year. A month later, after email dialogue, some of the women of colour that had been in attendance at the Race, Privilege and Identity workshop, as well as other attendees, decided to gather at LWP one Saturday afternoon. The purpose was for

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meeting diverse black feminists

The seminars held at Goldsmiths College, University of London in October 2011, organised by Joan Anim-Addo, provided an additional arena to raise the question of the visibility of black British women and their relationship with existing archives. There was something profound about the gathering, about how powerful and significant it was to have this dialogue as black feminist activists. Having this dialogue in an academic space somehow legitimised it in the same way that records and archives have the power to do. Our discussions covered the impact of the change in government and the imposition of austerity on feminist organisations generally and archives in particular. We were stimulated by our common experiences. We have both been actively involved in feminist politics in London and nationally during the last decade. Our black feminist geography has led us to this point, and the extraordinary thing is that now, more than ever, there is a need to connect the dots, to find and create our UK black feminist narrative through archives, and to consciously preserve our history. 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: ‘Feminist archival research demands that we not only find lost women of the past but also become conscious of our positionality in relation to their positionality’ (Kirsch, 2008: 23).

Cecile Nobrega (1919–2013)

The statue, or monument, as Cecile liked to call it, entitled ‘The Bronze Woman’ was unveiled in Stockwell Memorial Garden, South London in October 2008. ‘The Bronze Woman’ is based on a poem by Cecile Nobrega and both the poem and the statue pay homage to the steadfastness, resilience and resourcefulness of black women surviving the horrors of enslavement in the Caribbean, and their determination to ensure the survival of future generations. Cecile had succeeded with her project at the age of 89. Ego’s interview with Cecile was inspired by a strong impetus to capture and preserve the story of the journey of the Bronze Woman. Ego reflects:
I had wanted people to be able to see her and hear her, to have an opportunity to know her beauty and intelligence. I was always struck with the idea that Cecile had had the vision to turn the words that she had written forty years before into an immortal legacy in bronze. I was present with Cecile and family at the installation of the statue on a glorious early Sunday morning in Stockwell. The area seemed still to be healing from the brutal wrongful police shooting just three years earlier of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell Station, across the road from where we were (Low, 2008). My short film, ‘Journey of a Bronze Woman’, depicting interviews with Cecile, her family and friends at the installation of the statue, was one of my first deposits into an archive; it was deposited at Lambeth Archives and Black Cultural Archives. Cecile Norbrega put me firmly on my archival path. (Figure 1)

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 fetishise or reify what already exists in the archive. We enrich and expand our black British feminist herstories and narratives. We realise the importance of noting that remembering and preserving has been a process, and in that process spaces have been created, relationships developed and our visibility increased. At the same time, a silence still persists around race. Our experience of participation as a result of writing this for the Special Issue has created an antidote to the experiences of marginalisation within the spaces of patriarchal and white feminist privilege.
seek the roots: an immersive and interactive archive of black feminist practice

So we go forward with the sense that there is no time like the present. As far as we are aware, there is not a black British feminist herstory and/or archive association, and this is urgently needed. Such an organisation would be in a position to document the breadth of black feminist organising and activism in the United Kingdom, as well as offer a black British feminist perspective on the historical work that has thus far been carried out by the Black and Asian Studies Association, and the Black Cultural Archives, for instance. Another aspect of this organisation’s work would be to challenge and influence archiving policy and practice at the macro and the micro level, so that Britain’s public history and its teaching more accurately reflect the multiple heritages of its citizens. There is a gap that exists in regard to research and academic literature in the United Kingdom around race, diversity and archival education, so we need to act now. We need to document and record as we go, while maintaining a pragmatic approach. We cannot afford to leave it to serendipity, though we believe it has a role to play in uncovering a good story. We also cannot afford to leave it to the lucky find in the attic or garage. Lest we forget, 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:

One thing we know as Black feminists is how important it is for us to recognise our own lives as herstory. Also as Black women, as Lesbians and feminists, there is no guarantee that our lives will ever be looked at with the kind of respect given to certain people from other races, sexes or classes. There is similarly no guarantee that we or our movement will survive long enough to become safely historical. We must document ourselves now’. (Smith & Smith, 1978, cited in Gumbs, 2012:59)

The experience with LWP left us feeling quite simply robbed, but the process of archiving has helped to support our road to recovery, serving as a kind of ‘archival therapy’. Archives have offered us an opportunity to find ways to heal and be empowered through being exposed to a variety of narratives by black women who have paved the way. The LWP organisational records have been deposited with Lambeth Archives and are currently being voluntarily archived by Ego. This has meant that the many women who participated and fought for the space will not be forgotten and the wider connections to our UK feminist herstory will be preserved.

authors’ biographies

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references


