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'Sight unseen: black British women and the BBC archive'

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ABSTRACT

To mark a century of British broadcasting, an expansive selection of the BBC's archives were made public in 2022. Within this centenary arc, the representation of black British women was caught in a double bind. Black actresses who made inroads into mainstream BBC Television were in many ways the subjects of a mediated hypervisibility. Meanwhile black feminist activists who forged significant solidarities in the late twentieth century were conspicuous by their absence in BBC records, echoing broader erasures in histories of feminism. This article reflects on *Reclaiming a Lost Past*, an intergenerational project I led tied to these contradictions and anchored in debates on the push and pull of visibility. I place these reflections in a wider analysis of the BBC's entanglement with racial liberalism and of the interplays with a politics of reclamation. Keeping the dangers of co-option in mind, I urge anti-racist feminist media historians to pay closer attention to the knottiness of archival visibility, especially in the context of a cultural liberalism that professes not to "see" race and gender.

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Introduction

A century of broadcasting to the nation and beyond saw the BBC galvanised into action in retelling its own histories. Marking the span from its earliest transmissions, first as a private company in 1922 and later as the public service broadcaster we now recognise, the Corporation (with civic and educational partners) offered a series of digitised archival materials under the web banner of BBC 100. Framed by scholarly and guest curation, and drawing heavily on oral history, collections including "100 Faces" and "100 Voices" presented a detailed sweep across significant programming and institutional moments. From the very first radio station 2LO to Michaela Coel's TV drama *I May Destroy You*, images, sounds, and memories threaded together an overarching story of the BBC's singular contribution to Britain's mediated life in the twentieth century and into the present. Archival sections titled "Pioneering Women" and "People, Nation, Empire" contextualised in contemporary terms the broadcast hierarchies of the past, in the main locating the BBC as a cultural force that tried to keep in step with social change, or even to broker it, over the decades.

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In among the critique and commemoration were a handful of visual references to a number of black British women, like Coel, who had been involved with the Corporation either as in-house personnel or as contributing “talent.” Some were household names in Britain such as newsreader Moira Stuart and children’s television presenter Floella Benjamin. Others who were not technically British but resident in London earlier in the twentieth century were perhaps lesser known, as with Jamaican poet and wartime radio producer Una Marson. Her portrayal, along with those featured in internal photos like Gold Coast (later Ghanaian) producers Mrs Laryea and Miss Tamakloe, pictured at staff training in 1954, highlighted the longtime presence of Caribbean, African, and Asian women in what is now called the BBC’s World Service. Together, their profiles signalled varied confluences of race, gender, and nation-making within the BBC’s infrastructures. But they also indicated the weight placed by the broadcaster on showcasing itself as a see-through conduit for racialised women at the centenary juncture, or in what have been described as divisive, “fractured times” in the mediation of nationhood (Margaretta Jolly 2024).

This article digs into contradictions in the Corporation’s relationship to the broadcast lineage of black British women by using my work as a contributing historian to BBC 100 as both a case study and as a point of departure. It does so in order to argue that an alertness to archival visibility, to its functions and limits, needs to be centred in the practice of anti-racist feminist media historiography. My analysis, particularly in the second half of this article, draws on *Reclaiming a Lost Past* (or *Reclaiming*), an intergenerational public project I led in 2022 tied to the representation of black British women and the BBC centenary. It was a project focused on two contrasting legacies, that of black actresses who were largely on-screen from the 1960s onwards and that of black feminist activists who were mostly unheard or unseen on the BBC in the 1970s and later. Designed to engage different publics on the meanings and methods of historical recovery, its interventions and outputs were combined into multimedia form for a site connected to BBC 100.

Reclaiming set itself against the grain of some major BBC histories, such as Asa Briggs’ five-volume *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (Asa Briggs 1995), in which the grading out of race and gender in the assembly of “the past” has stealthily bolstered history-writing’s own hierarchies (Michel-Rolph Trouillot 1995). As a public programme, it addressed the two-sidedness of BBC visibility in relation to what Beverley Bryan et al. termed the “triple state of bondage” that bound “race, sex and class” in twentieth-century Britain (Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe 1985, 2). And in collaboration with schoolchildren, feminist activists, a black women’s podcast, and BBC History, it produced a range of recuperative conversations and artefacts, which this article goes on to discuss.

At the project’s heart, however, remained thorny questions. What was being reclaimed and for whom? The explicit aim was to surface material from BBC records—chiefly, audio and visual transmissions—or to write and speak back to absences and in so doing to inscribe black British women into national broadcasting’s century-long arc. Woven into this was my intention to open archival channels for the general public, and especially for black and racialised women, so they could discover and to some extent query the process of making marginalised histories apparent. Yet at a more profound level the project prompted a confrontation with the haziness of acts of reclamation and their place in black women’s historiography. Jennifer Nash (2020), drawing on earlier theorists including

Evelyn Hammonds (1994) and Darlene Clark Hine (1989), has rightly pointed to the tensions that run through the umbrella term “to reclaim” as a principal method of black feminist history. In its intersections with the politics of dissemblance and respectability, Nash argues, reclamation emerges as a practice mottled by discrepancies. If a core objective of black feminist scholarship, she suggests, is to “map silences, secrecy, and ‘fugitivity’ as strategies of black women’s lives,” why does there prevail a persistent “impulse to expose those strategies, to catalog them, to document their persistence?” (2020, 521).

Within the parameters of a short-lived funded project it was tricky to enter firmly into these debates. So this article seeks to probe further into the problematic of media reclamation, scrutinising its tie-ins with resistance, co-option, and the visibility of BBC archives. It begins with an examination of early examples of black women at the Corporation and of the ecology of the mid-twentieth century BBC, elements that scaffolded the composition of the *Reclaiming* project. Also addressed is the rise of British racial liberalism in the same period and its relationship to current historiography. I then move to detail the project itself while reflecting on the tensions within acts of media reclamation, drawing on Nash. I note here that I am a former BBC radio producer, a woman of colour, and therefore have seen up close some of the BBC’s gendered and racialised structures. This article, however, is not a work of auto-ethnography but one of media history, and ultimately it asks a core question. What kinds of dissemblance and respectability may have been at play for black British women associated with the BBC, as well as for the anti-racist feminist media historian laying claim to their stories?

Now you see me, now you don’t

In locating black women in the *longue durée*, as it were, of the British broadcast-scape, it is worth noting some distinguishing markers. The use of “black” (or Black) frequently denoted the political blackness of the 1970s and 1980s when anti-imperialist and anti-racist solidarities were fused across lines of ethnicity in people of colour, to use today’s terminology. Gendered political blackness, though much contested and overtaken by what came to be known as identity politics, was both a mobilising force and a platform for diasporic articulations of British feminism (Nydia A Swaby 2014). Its momentum in women’s rights was symbolised by the foundation of activist groups such as OWAAD, the Organisation for Women of African and Asian Descent (1978–1982), and Southall Black Sisters, still in action today. But as a movement it was fairly invisible and inaudible on national BBC airwaves at the time of its consolidation, including on Radio 4’s daily women’s affairs strand *Woman’s Hour*, which I discuss in more detail later. While politically black feminists also did not gain much airtime on non-BBC outlets, innovative series like London Weekend Television’s *Skin* (1980–1982) and Channel 4’s *Bandung File* (1985–1991) were decisively engaged with the circuits of Afro-Asian affinity and Third Worldism that overlapped with the rise of black feminism in Britain. Channel 4 in particular began in 1982 as a publicly owned yet commercially funded broadcaster with a commitment to serve minoritised audiences (Sarita Malik 2008).

In contrast the BBC as public broadcaster was, and still is, more state-adjacent. As Britain’s only legal provider of television until 1955, and of radio until 1973, it navigated the growth of post-war immigration largely in collaboration with think tanks and experts aligned with

the government's assimilationist agenda, such as the Institute of Race Relations. Caribbean and South Asian publics—at the forefront of “New Commonwealth” migration—were mostly catered to as distinct constituencies, an approach embedded in the 1965 launch of the BBC Immigrant Programming Unit which brought with it the promotion of English language acquisition to Asians in discrete broadcasts.¹ Meanwhile, West Indians (the term of the time) were folded into mainstream output given their greater fluency in English (Darrell Newton 2011; Gavin Schaffer 2014). Against this background, Caribbean actresses made significant strides into domestic BBC schedules in the 1960s, some having started in the 1950s. Often combining theatrical work, or entering the BBC through freelance jobs on its overseas radio services, they stepped into roles that caught the swift change in Britain's cultural fabric (Stephen Bourne 2021). Pearl Prescod, who had arrived from Trinidad in 1954 on a scholarship to the Guildhall School of Music, was one such performer. In 1958 she was on stage and on radio in two works authored by Jamaican writers which broke new ground in bringing Caribbean plays to white British audiences: Barry Reckord's *Flesh to a Tiger* at the Royal Court Theatre in London and Sylvia Wynter's *Under the Sun* on the BBC Third Programme, the precursor to Radio 3. Wynter, who went on to be a scholar and theorist, was herself an actress and frequent BBC contributor in the late 50s and early 60s. She took on roles in her own radio plays—which in 1958 also encompassed the Third Programme's *The Barren One*, her West Indian adaptation of Federico García Lorca's *Yerma* – and starred alongside Prescod, Pauline Henriques (another regular presence on BBC broadcasts to the Caribbean) and Cleo Laine, later best known as a jazz singer.²

Increasing appearances of black actresses in what the Corporation termed “Home” networks—radio and television channels aimed at Britons—brought into view the BBC's function as a matrix of imperial permeations in this period. Barbadian novelist George Lamming captured the sense of inward momentum at the BBC in his 1960 set of essays *The Pleasures of Exile* by describing the push from anti-colonial Caribbean writers and actors in Britain to move from the “back door” of the Overseas Services, their usual entry point, to the hallowed networks of Home where colonised subjects could speak back to the mother country (George Lamming 1960, 44–45). Heavyweight commentary on race and colonialism for British audiences, however, was hemmed in by the voices and faces of white expertise (Sarita Malik 2002, 37–39). By comparison, dramatised broadcasts emerged as a more hospitable genre for incoming black cultural talent. Fictionalised programmes also allowed for a soft nod to the transfers of power dominoing across the British empire and to what some considered its implosion in the imperial heartland. Edric Connor from Trinidad, whose wife Pearl was also an actress, was signed up by the BBC to help on and off-air with several TV and radio dramas commissioned to address British “race relations,” such as the Home Service's *My People and Your People* in 1959 which touched on the racist riots in Notting Hill a year earlier. Many of these shows were “cloying,” as Amanda Bidnall notes, both in their integrationist messaging and in asking the “viewer's pardon for native white prejudice” (Amanda M Bidnall 2013, 62). Nonetheless they opened up parts, some substantial in scope, and often meant actors could speak in their own Caribbean accents rather than in an approximation of RP (Received Pronunciation).

Crucially, such dramas provided one of the few pathways into domestic media for black women creatives and thinkers in 50s and 60s Britain, given it was men who occupied the foreground of Caribbean representation on the BBC. Men such as Lamming, Jamaican

critic Stuart Hall, and Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine, among others, were clustered across prominent schedule slots and at the helm of broadcast content. Sylvia Wynter was a notable exception. She won writing commissions and contributed to high-profile broadcasts like *British Caribbean Writers*, aired in 1958 on the Third Programme, and in which she was the only female speaker out of nine authors in discussion (Alex Fabrizio 2021).

For other black women like Pearl Prescod, compromises had to be made in taking on semi-caricatured dramatic roles. At times, this generated stiff critique from more radical black British quarters. One such assessment was given by the progressive monthly *West Indian Gazette* which stated that Prescod and “other coloured artistes” were too often cast as “spineless, easily-manipulated characters—devoid of any significant mental power who smile politely, mind their manners, stay at their menial stations” (as quoted in Jenny Bourne, Anya Edmond-Pettitt and Chris Searle 2022, 13). A decade later, *The Guardian* declared that Jamaican-born, British-raised Valerie Murray had “jumped over the colour barrier” when she took on a “colour-blind” role as a lab assistant in *The Expert* (1968–1976), a BBC TV series about a Home Office pathologist (Elisabeth Dunn 1971). Yet Murray herself was ambivalent about this supposed breakthrough, noting that casting directors still too often expected her to sound African or West Indian and were put off by her RP tones. Radio was a preferable medium to television, she insisted, as tensions around the issue of visible black presence could be elided.³ Whether radio truly provided more opportunities by the 1970s for black actresses to step out of the inevitability of playing the foil to a white male lead is hard to ascertain. Further entwined with these contradictions was also the BBC’s implausible stance on its racist series, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958–1978). A blackface TV “hit,” it was, according to the Corporation, a series anchored in honourable traditions of guying rather than in screen or theatrical racism. Even in the face of viewer complaints and internal staff dissent, the BBC’s Director of Public Affairs Kenneth Lamb maintained in the late 1960s that the show was merely entertainment and certainly not about “race” (Christine Grandy 2020). The programme continued to run on air for another decade, making it one of the longest running BBC series of all time.

Visible frictions

At the heart of the BBC’s obfuscation about minstrelsy was its defence, proffered in implicit form, that it simply did not “see” race. This self-styled colour blindness was a mode of passive non-racism, an iteration of the racial liberalism that took shape in mid-century Britain and which emerged out of colonial logics (Rob Waters 2023). Fused into its paradigm was what Kennetta Hammond Perry has termed the “mystique” of racial tolerance (Kennetta Hammond Perry 2018, 89–125), a myth-making constructed and circulated in part by media narratives blurring racism in Britain. The cloudiness enveloping such mystique meant that for black British women, especially in the earlier decades of the second half of the twentieth century, not being seen in and by the BBC was a doubled and at times violent experience. Not only was there the media infrastructure of racism and sexism to contend with, along with the classed dimensions of cultural production, there was also a measure of institutional denial that decreed the problems faced by women of colour to be invisible. Sylvia Wynter had tried to signal to this obstacle in the

1957 Home Service feature (a short documentary) *Journey to an Expectation* by pointing to the British habit of avoiding explicit expression, a tactic which gave cover to racialised and gendered strictures.⁴

More than a decade earlier, Una Marson—the first producer of the BBC’s literary radio series *Caribbean Voices* (1943–1958)—had seen her career cut short as a result of the psychological toll of being gaslit (in today’s terminology) about the racialised misogyny she faced both in wider British society and at the BBC (James Procter 2015). In the run-up to her departure, Marson had had to contend with R.A. Rendall, the Assistant Controller of the Overseas Service, partly backtracking from a position of unwavering support. He had asked her to agree to fewer on-air appearances, and to keeping her name off programme credits, under pressure from the Colonial Office (Leonie Thomas 2018, 219–220). In recent years, Marson’s reputation as a black media “pioneer” in 30s and 40s Britain has been rehabilitated by the Corporation. She was placed front and centre of BBC 100 in online profiles and in a TV drama-documentary—subtitled *Our Lost Caribbean Voice* – that married her personal writings with expert interviews and a dramatised performance from Seroqa Davis. Directors Avril E Russell and Topher Campbell did not shy away from the connections between Marson’s mental ill health and the racism and misogyny of the time. Neither did they paint the BBC’s milieu as an assured safe space for black women. Yet the programme promotion by the BBC itself downplayed to a degree its own role in her breakdown, or, as the publicity material had it, in the “significant personal costs” she ended up bearing.⁵ Marson’s name should no doubt be restored to the annals of broadcast history. But in this instance a thin gloss of respectability has seeped into the BBC’s plugging of itself in a kind of institutional dissemblance that turns inside out the strategies of resistance outlined by Hine (1989).

Filtering into the BBC’s archival hierarchies, then, are power plays that cut across colour blindness, gendered erasure, and historical retrieval. These frictions map onto the broader faultlines of archival practice in which black feminists now find themselves (Yula Burin and Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski 2014). New initiatives have done much to curate black British herstories from below and in radical form, combining queer and decolonial approaches in projects like *Mother Tongues*, in the varied collectives commemorating activist Olive Morris, or in the celebration of Pan-African film curator June Givanni (Nydia A Swaby and Chandra Frank 2020, 125). For *Reclaiming a Lost Past*, however, the challenge lay at the other end of the spectrum. Could a national media archive like that of the BBC be a site for black or anti-racist feminist counter-moves given its proximity to liberal networks of coloniality and to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) called “Western eyes”? I thought back to how, many years after her time spent broadcasting in Britain, Sylvia Wynter had written of the neutering of anti-colonial and social protest movements from the 60s onwards through institutional capture (2003, 262). Although Wynter did not name the BBC directly, it was credible that her own experiences with the Corporation had fed into an understanding of Western (or Global North) cultural infrastructures and their quiet declawing of dissent. This tallied with my own experiences at the BBC. And in my research at the BBC’s Written Archives Centre, I came across several examples of Wynter trying to speak aloud in the late 50s on the BBC’s airwaves of the need to be seen as “an equal human being.”⁶ Yet, by the mid-60s, she had left Britain and its mediated sphere, returning to the West Indies (and later to America) as Marson had done some two decades earlier.

The costs of being incorporated while trying to “unsettle” coloniality were likely too high back then (Wynter 2003). But the toll of co-option also warrants closer consideration in the current moment. Wynter’s words of caution are germane when we consider how black feminist concepts such as intersectionality have been adopted and defanged—by the BBC and the wider media, in historiography, in feminist theory and practice, as elsewhere—as a one-stop source to “magically facilitate inclusion” (Heidi Safia Mirza and Yasmin Gunaratnam 2014). The alerts embedded in Wynter’s texts, and in the patchily persevered written records of her on-air BBC contributions, certainly formed a kind of backbone to *Reclaiming* as it set out to question the politics of on-screen visibility while mindful of the tensions of working in collaboration with the BBC itself.

How did it go, Josette Simon?

The first strand of *Reclaiming a Lost Past* brought together secondary schoolchildren in a set of participatory workshops.⁷ Utilising BBC archival artefacts as prompts for creative responses, the workshops joined in with a radical arts-in-education project led by the Young Vic, a youth-oriented theatre working closely with communities in the two London boroughs where it is situated, Lambeth and Southwark. Both areas are marked by long histories of anti-racist and black feminist resistance (Tracy Fisher 2002; Ron Ramdin 1987) and by intersections of race, class, and punitive educational outcomes in the present (Department of Education 2024). In partnership with Dunraven School, a large mixed comprehensive in Lambeth, *Reclaiming* sought to challenge the “enclosure” of the national curriculum which makes the teaching of black British history largely optional (Jessica Perera 2020, 7). It also aimed to go against the tide of negative spaces in London educational settings where black schoolgirls can find themselves “viewed with suspicion and hostility” or refracted through historical tropes such as the “Angry Black Woman” (Njilan Morris-Jarra and Ebinehita Iyere 2025, 10–12).

At a more granular level, this project strand surfaced BBC stills, largely publicity shots, and moving images of actresses including Letitia Wright (*Small Axe*), Freema Agyeman (*Doctor Who*), Mona Hammond (*Eastenders*), and many others. In voluntary extra-curricular weekly sessions with a Young Vic multidisciplinary practitioner, students aged 11 to 16 (in Key Stages 3 and 4) were given the images as springboards with which they could engage, or work around or against, in whatever way they wished. Many of the workshop participants were young black women of African or Afro-Caribbean heritage negotiating their own daily encounters with the racialised and gendered dimensions of British media. As digital natives, they had little recognition of the BBC’s contemporary content as distinct from that of ITV and Channel 4 or even, to some extent, from streaming platforms. For participants, the BBC did not carry any particular associations with representations of black British women. But there was a tacit awareness of the distrust prevalent in slightly older generations of black British women that the Corporation, as Francesca Sobande has shown, was typically “narrow and stereotypical” in this regard (Francesca Sobande 2020, 51). Mingled in with this was a sense that the BBC had been central to their parents’ and grandparents’ news values, and that it held an emotive connection for the participants themselves as a mainstay of British Gen-Z childhood viewing.

As a programme of participatory media history, the *Reclaiming* workshops were a broadly blank canvas on which to “play,” following Gail Lewis’ concept of black feminism

as a space and an act of creative subject-making (Gail Lewis 2020). Under the guidance of practitioner Sheryl Malcolm, those taking part could write, draw, or make media content to speak back to the histories and the archival taxonomies they were confronting. Participants began by recognising that black actresses who had “made it” onto the prestige of a BBC network were not women who had been hidden from view but rather spotlighted on-screen in roles freighted with racialised meaning. Mainstream casting meant that in an average year in the early 1980s, for example, the number of black actors (men and women) in BBC TV dramas was likely under 3%, many of whom were tasked with playing subsidiary characters such as nurses or hospital orderlies (Tom May 2023, 124). When a black actress landed a prominent role in the 70s or 80s, especially if it went against tokenistic typecasting, it brought with it the full glare of a production focus and a public gaze that could lapse into “spectacularization” (Stuart Hall 1993, 107). At the same time, notable black actresses still sat in a liminal place in the BBC archive, sometimes catalogued in publicity stills and cast lists and sometimes missing from official records. The workshopping challenge was therefore a distinct one: how to navigate the archival “interplay of presence and absence” where black women, on screen, appear as both “everywhere and nowhere” (Lewis 2017, 11)?

In probing this paradox, one figure leapt out: Josette Simon. Best known as a Shakespearean actress, Simon’s first major role at the very start of her career was on *Blake’s 7*, a popular science fiction TV series on BBC1 (1978–1981). From 1980 until series-end she played Dayna Mellanby, one of the seven rebels on a fictional spaceship fighting against authoritarian rule. As with Valerie Murray on *The Expert*, Simon was a rarity for the time as a key character whose part was “colour-blind” on a show (set in a racially ambiguous dystopian world) that reached millions of viewers across Britain. Going on to gain principal roles at the Royal Shakespeare Company by the mid-80s, she was profiled in *The Times* as a performer with star potential who was trying her best to avoid being boxed in by racialised casting. Simon herself went on record with her frustrations at the “black actress” label tagged to her name and which had led to racist review comments comparing her, in one role as a newscaster, to BBC newsreader Moira Stuart (Benedict Nightingale 1991, 14).

For participants, with their vantage point in the post-Black lives Matter moment, these comments revealed one of the many ways in which informal calls were forged in the second half of the twentieth century to push back against the racial gaze. But as they considered how to “braid” (Joan Anim-Eddo 2014) their own understandings of black British women to the photographic and moving image lineages of black actresses on the BBC, a number of speculative thoughts surfaced. Examining *Blake’s 7* stills where Simon was shown on set and in costume, flanked by white male actors, they wondered how it felt for her to audition for blind-cast roles like that of Dayna Mellanby. What thoughts ran through her mind, what microaggressions might she have faced? And how might the untold records of such experiences clue us in to the way previous generations of actresses had claimed or distanced themselves from the term “black”?

With and against the grain

Such imaginative engagements were a form of “listening” to BBC images, an extension of Tina M. Campt’s reckoning with state-sanctioned visual archives where the “fissures, gaps, and interstices” in the production of official images are addressed by “attuning our senses

to the other affective frequencies through which photographs register” (Tina M Campt 2017, 8–9). Participants were in essence tuning an ear to the “quiet” and the “quotidian” elements of vernacular black subjectivities which suffuse official portraits and which Campt identifies as a mode of resistance (Campt 2017, 4–6). They could speculate and hear these subjectivities running through the archive proper. And it led them to envision monologues or dialogues and to record themselves asking Josette Simon, in a fictional encounter after her first audition at the BBC, “how did it go?”

As such, participants were tipping into what Saidiya Hartman has termed “critical fabulation,” their conjectures questioning “the received or authorized account” of the BBC’s documentation of black actresses by imagining “what might have happened or might have been said or done” (Saidiya Hartman 2008, 11). Hartman’s original concept responded directly to the violence of the archives of slavery and may at first glance appear to be out of place when grappling with the BBC’s institutional records. Yet the organic emergence of this mode of fabulatory history-telling in the *Reclaiming* workshops, prompted by the schoolchildren’s own “play,” shows how working speculatively with and against BBC archives allows new generations of Britons—all of whom have a stake in the BBC as future licence-fee payers—to exert a measure of public proprietorship over its historical records. In offering their own fabulated versions of BBC history, young black (and white) Britons can begin to get close up to, and to question, the state-sanctioned myth-making that envelops race, gender, and the mediated British society.

An important aspect that also materialised during this imaginative process was the participants’ harnessing of joy. In spoken word, poetry, and collaged artwork—recorded in audio and visual format by themselves—they spoke aloud how Josette Simon and other actresses on the BBC had been “brave” and “beautiful” in an aesthetic akin to Christina Sharpe’s beauty as method (Christina Sharpe 2023). “You burn us to ashes and from ashes we will rise to start our own fire,” one student’s contribution chimed, “so I ask of you, hear me say—black is beautiful, black is bold, and black is brave.”

In a final set of creative engagements, participants put themselves directly in the frame. Using an analogue camera—a reference to last century’s visual technology—and with the help of photographer Myah Jeffers, each student took a self-portrait with a framed picture of a black British actress in a BBC publicity still. Shot in black and white, and with an intensity of pose, the images were composed with what could be described as an “oppositional gaze,” a looking back at the BBC by participants and, as bell hooks defined it, “at one another, naming what we see” (bell hooks 1992, 116). These portraits were ultimately located, though, within the architecture of the BBC’s output along with all the critical fabulatory work participants had crafted, as well as material from the project’s other strands. The webpage where they were housed was an offshoot of the BBC 100 site, capped by a video introduction from me about the aims of the project, and with a short video package on the students’ activities in the workshops produced by John Escolme from the BBC History team.

And so we returned to the overarching questions regarding anti-racist feminist media history in the context of BBC archives. What circuits of ownership and mediation overlapped in this visualised presentation and how could I, the historian leading the project, ensure the participants’ work with *and* against the grain of the archive was itself visible? In the video introduction I laid out how the project was intended to be a platform for young publics to put forth their own provocations to the BBC in relation to black British women.

But one concrete method was to also co-produce the public-facing content with the Young Vic and the participants themselves. This included adding, removing or reworking text, audio, and video material with joint agreement, and having students curate the order and placement of images. The artefacts sat on a Canvas website, a semi-external spin-off from the BBC's dedicated site of its own history and from its publicly accessible archive.⁸ In editorial and curatorial terms, the cognate positionality of Canvas worked in our favour as there was minimal intervention from the BBC, revealing it to be a surprising new facet in the Corporation's public access mechanisms.

On-air, the BBC has for many decades tried out different approaches to entryways for communities and publics. Notable among these experiments was *Open Door* which began in 1973 with the founding of the BBC's Community Programming Unit. Perhaps its most famous broadcast, in association with the Campaign Against Racism in the Media, was *It Ain't Half Racist Mum* (1979), a critique co-presented by Jamaican-British thinker Stuart Hall that took direct aim at the BBC itself. Often born out of a radical push from individuals or sets of personnel at the BBC, initiatives like *Open Door* were at times genuinely disruptive to the media status quo, surprising even the Corporation's wider staff members, especially those of minoritised ethnicity (Jolly 2024, 120–122).

Having only begun in 2022, the Canvas sub-sites are a very new phenomenon in this long history of public access and they no doubt bring a patina of BBC "respectability" to public media history intervention. But they also prompt us to pay attention to the scaffolding of broadcast and archive material, and to the public possibilities of staking a claim to it. These auxiliary sites can be deployed to turn the light back onto the BBC's failings or limitations, and to do so firmly at a tangent by sitting near-but-not-inside the Corporation's web infrastructure.

"Sexually suspect and politically to the left"

Reclaiming's second strand took a closer look at the flip side of hypervisibility. Black British feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, as the project uncovered, had been largely absent on-air on the national networks of BBC Radio and Television in the decades of their movement's upsurge. Little could be heard or seen of the groundswell of grassroots feminist organisations that came into being with the foundation of groups like Manchester Black Women's Co-operative (1975), Liverpool Black Sisters (1979), as well as OWAAD and Southall Black Sisters. At the other end of the spectrum, feminist theoretical attention was being drawn to the long arm of colonial dynamics. Figures such as Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar identified the tail end of the second "wave" of feminism as deeply oppressive in its construction. The ascendant narrative of women's oppression in Britain, they argued, had taken little account of the voices of black feminists, instead building a political practice "rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods," and fashioning a "herstory" that suffered from "the same form of historical amnesia of white male historians" (Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar 1984, 5).

Turning to BBC records for on-air coverage in real time of this shift in British feminism may appear to be a blinkered historical approach, not least because it perhaps gives the impression that most black British feminists would have welcomed the attention. Oral history interviews with those at the forefront of the movement on what, if any, broadcast media strategy they had at the time would have elucidated this but such interviews were sadly beyond the remit

of *Reclaiming*. Even so, the challenge to imperial feminism, as Amos and Parmar termed it, had been addressed to the mainstream of the women's movement and so the BBC's cross-society reach would likely have carried some weight with black British feminists.

Of course, the BBC's national broadcast networks were never chiefly instruments for from-below, ground-up content (*Open Door* and other experiments notwithstanding).⁹ They were, as Krishan Kumar described, largely avenues for a politics of the "middle ground" (Krishan Kumar 1975). In scheduled programming, therefore, audiences caught swift glimpses of working-class activists, and of feminists even less so. Yet the Corporation's daily radio strand on women's affairs, *Woman's Hour*, had been on air since 1946. And although it officially "disassociated itself from the feminist cause," as Kate Murphy has noted, by the 1970s and into the early 1980s it was regularly broadcasting "a wide range of items about women's equality, confident that these were of interest to its audience" (Kate Murphy 2022, 212). 1971's "Five Points of Women's Liberation" was one such *Woman's Hour* series, a precursor to the programme's more explicit exploration of feminist issues after a change of editor in 1983 (Murphy 2022, 213). Given this trajectory, one might expect some focus on equality for racialised women in Britain as the 70s wore on. But, as elsewhere on Radio 4, the programme by and large swerved around the subject of Britain's own racial dynamics. Instead, *Woman's Hour* features such as "O My Sister, Light the Lamp" (February 17 1976) and "The Black Sash" (March 30 1976) looked outwards to countries like America and South Africa. Such content had the effect of framing black women's challenges as often linked to segregationist realities and at a distance from everyday life in Britain.

Woman's Hour was one of the talking points in the *Reclaiming* workshop at The Feminist Library in London, an archival resource and meeting centre established in 1975. Here, with the guarantee of anonymity, a cross-generational group of feminists (mainly women of colour) joined me to speak openly about the BBC's relationship to black British feminism. Debating the symbolism of liberal tolerance, we also considered in detail archive clips from the early days of the Corporation's specialist black British TV programming, specifically from *Ebony*, a weekly BBC Two programme that aired from 1982 until 1990.

As a "magazine" series, the show combined features, discussions, and interviews to report on contemporary topics of interest to, and about, Britain's black communities. Hosted by Juliet Alexander and Vincent Herbert, two young black journalists, *Ebony* marked the beginning of moves by British-born black producers and editors into the infrastructures of mainstream BBC TV and from where they could push for higher profile series like *Black Britain* (produced on BBC Two in the late 1990s by Maxine Watson, later in charge of BBC Documentary Commissioning). While feminists were infrequently platformed in this specialist programming, *Ebony* had devoted a substantial chunk of one of its broadcasts to Abasindi, a Manchester-based black women's cooperative that opened in 1980. *Ebony* showed Abasindi in a sympathetic light with varied footage and an extensive interview with one of its leaders, Maria Noble. Watching the introduction to the feature, however, the *Reclaiming* participants were struck by the phrasing of Juliet Alexander's scripted introduction when she said:

Women's groups have always had a stereotyped image. They're generally portrayed as sexually suspect and politically to the left. But if a group is black as well, the caricature is even harder to escape. So, what's the reality behind the stereotype? We went to Manchester to talk to members of Abasindi, one of the longest-established women's groups in this country.¹⁰

Alexander's relatively impassive facial movements while delivering this script to camera stood out. Had she written these words, participants wondered, or were they the result of much back and forth with editors? Moreover, how "knowing" was this address to the audience by Alexander, a black woman herself, as she identified the "caricature" of black feminists? Because while the language of stereotyping was being critiqued, it was being done both euphemistically and with the straight face of BBC impartiality. As a coded reference to lesbianism, "sexually suspect" arguably played into the negativity surrounding black lesbian sexuality, itself the subject of a fight over visibility in the feminist movement (Carmen, Gail, Shaila, and Pratibha 1984). The brisk reference to the left was less arch but again showed the grey area in which Alexander was operating. Though her introduction nodded to the charge of leftist politics as a smear, it also implied black women's groups were above and beyond the trappings of such political leanings, even though most cooperatives like Abasindi were rooted in formations tied to the radical left. With no written records of the production, we considered the constrictions in which Alexander operated, such as the brevity required of her script or the codes of BBC speech and posture. In the end, participants reminded each other of how stricter forms of dissemblance and respectability were sometimes required of black women presenters. As the artist Rosa-Johan Uddoh has shown in her installation on Moira Stuart's work as a newsreader (Rosa-Johan Uddoh 2019), performing the face of BBC trustworthiness on issues of racial (or sexual) tension as a black woman might involve a set of semi-masked looks and gazes that may be imperceptible at first glance but that tell another story on closer inspection.

Conclusion

Reclaiming a Lost Past revealed the sharp limits of BBC visibility for black British women both in the twentieth century and as a strategy for reclaiming history. As became clear, to reclaim, in Nash's sense, requires us to interrogate more closely the complicities and the grey areas in which historical presence is made legible or authorised. Visible acts of historical recovery in the context of the BBC—too often accorded a prize status by anti-racist feminist media historians themselves—have to be approached with scepticism and with arm's-length tactics.

As for the BBC itself, a genuine reckoning with its own century-long history requires more than inclusionary gestures. It means reckoning with the way it has curated absence, privileged modes of dissemblance, and promoted types of respectability. It also means ceding narrative control to those long excluded from the public broadcast imaginary not only by allowing space for speculative modes of engagement but by accepting the terms of their critique.

Reclaiming a Lost Past was perhaps ultimately too boxed in by its position in the borderlands of official BBC History. Yet in its small way it exposed how media publics can redraw the contours of imperfect historiographical interventions with which they are in dialogue. In doing so, these publics can shed light on the soft-soaping of media narratives about black British women, and on how visibility is not an endgame but an enduring terrain of struggle.

Notes

1. Report of Proceedings, First and Second Conference on Immigrants, 6 and 13 July 1965. Programmes for Racial Minorities, Policy, BBC WAC (Written Archives Centre) R78/1, 816/1, 9.
2. Wynter's BBC plays include *The University of Hunger* (co-written with Jan Carew), 9 September 1960, BBC Third Programme, and *Brother Man*, 22 June 1964, BBC Home Service. Other appearances as an actress, interviewee, or discussant on domestic BBC networks include *Children's Television: Bra'Nancy and the Tiger*, 12 September 1957, BBC Television, and *Journey to an Expectation*, 19 March 1957, BBC Home Service.
3. As quoted in Dunn's article for *The Guardian*, 1971.
4. Script, *Journey to an Expectation*, Miss Wynter inserts 1 & 3, BBC WAC, 1957, 10.
5. *Una Marson: Our Lost Caribbean Voice*, BBC Two, 23 October 2022. Publicity available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001dht8>. BBC online articles include Robert Seatter, In Focus: Una Marson, at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/creativitydiversity/history/umamarson>; David Hendy, Caribbean Voices, at: <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/people-nation-empire/caribbean-voices>
6. Transcript, *British Caribbean Writers*, BBC WAC, 1958, 16.
7. All references to participants' comments and artefacts are sourced from my records and from the project website (listed in note 8). An episode of the podcast *Letter to a Black Girl* was also a part of the strand on actresses but this article concentrates on the workshops for schoolchildren.
8. The respective sites are: <https://canvas-story.bbcwind.co.uk/reclaiming/>; <https://bbc.com/historyofthebbc>; <https://bbcwind.co.uk/>
9. I note my focus is on national broadcasting and not on BBC local channels, often the first platform for "from below"-style programmes for minoritised ethnicities. In 1974, Alex Pascall began hosting *Black Londoners* on the local radio station for Greater London, BBC GLR. See also David Dunkley Gyimah, 2023, "Black London (BBC GLR 1991–1993), the Importance of a BBC Radio Archive for Black British People and Scholars". *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 30 (2), 570–586. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19376529.2023.2261924>
10. *Ebony*, 15 May 1985, BBC Two; my transcription.

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