

Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory

The Rape Crisis movement (rapecrisis.org.uk) has been instrumental shaping my standpoint and work as a Black¹ feminist activist. For over thirty years, I have been involved in working within different Rape Crisis centres (including Manchester, Oxford and Trafford) constructing and delivering feminist support for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence including the development of specific services for Black, Asian and Minoritised² Ethnic women. Throughout this journey, the political writings of Black feminist activist scholars such as Audre Lorde have and continue to be an anchor³ in the tasks such as:

- '[T]he transformation of silence into language and action' (Lorde, 1977:40);
- Working in feminist collective structures that resist patriarchal hierarchies whilst fulfilling the requirements of governance structures; the formulation of Black feminist governance. Establishing and sustaining Black women-only feminist support services, training and Black women-only feminist consciousness-raising spaces in the context of a Rape Crisis centres constituted of Black and white women;
- Attending to the specificity of the experience of difference whilst attending to the indeterminacy of difference. Working with Avtar Brah's question, '[a]t what point,

¹ I wish to acknowledge the importance of Andrea Tara-Chand's love, wisdom and friendship in working with me to establish the first Black women's service at Manchester Rape Crisis back in 1994; our enduring Black feminist relationship is an example of Audre Lorde's 'Erotic as Power' (1978) in action.

I am aware that the use of the term 'Black' is problematic and contested. Brah (1996) provides a detailed analysis of the issue, stating that: 'In practice, the category "black feminism" in Britain is only meaningful vis-à-vis the category "white feminism"' (Brah, 1996:112; Parmar and Kay, 1988:176).

² I want to draw attention to problems with the term 'minority' and agree with Burman's (2005) analysis: 'We used the term "minoritization" (rather than "minority" or "minority ethnic group") to highlight that groups and communities do not occupy the position of "minority" by virtue of some inherent property (of their culture or religion, for example), but rather they come to acquire this position as the outcome of a socio-historical and political process' (Burman, 2005:533; parentheses in original).

and in what ways, for example, does the specificity of a particular social experience become an expression of essentialism? (Brah, 1996:95);

- Maintaining a feminist praxis where feminist reflective processes and internal and external practical service delivery demands are mutually constitutive creating an inherent balance between doing and thinking;
- Remaining steadfast in our mission to form strategies of anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-imperialist anti-capitalist feminist resistance whilst dealing with ‘that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships’ (Lorde, 1980:123).

My reliance on the writings of Black feminist activist scholars has enabled me to understand that writing is a form of political activism in itself and this perspective challenges the ‘dividing practices’(Foucault, 1975, 1982) that split theory and activism, summarised in the term ‘the activism of Black feminist theory’ (El Saadawi, 2009; Nayak, 2015). I have come to know writing as a form of survival summarized by Barbara Christian in the following way, ‘[b]ut what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally...a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating (Christian, 1987:21).

The activism of Black feminist theory is an example of the mutually constitutive relationship between method and content, where ‘theoretical positions and the criticism interact with the lived experience’ (Boyce Davies, 1994: 55; Nayak, 2015: 31-34; Patterson, et. al., 2016: 55-76). The activism of Black feminist theory is constituted of three key elements; the dialectic, the dialogical (Hill-Collins, 2000: 30) and ‘the erotic’ (Lorde, 1978):

- Dialectical - The activism of Black feminist arises out of the very oppression it seeks to confront.

- Dialogical - The activism of Black feminist theory arises out of collective engagement with struggles for social justice
- The Erotic – The activism of Black feminist theory is:

‘a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives...not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe’ (Lorde, 1978:57).

Trafford Rape Crisis (traffordrapecrisis.com) was launched in March, 2011, and the Black Women’s Service was launched in March, 2012 during International Women’s Week. The activism of Audre Lorde in particular, and the activism of Black feminist theory in general, continue to provide the foundation of Trafford Rape Crisis organisational structures, vision, mission and support services and was instrumental in my role as the Trafford Rape Crisis Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic Women’s Service Development Worker (2011-2013). For example, the recruitment, training and support of volunteers that ran between December, 2011 and March, 2012 founded on the activism of Black feminist theory significantly increased the number of Black women in the Collective. In turn, these significant changes in the demographic constitution of Trafford Rape Crisis reconstituted the ideology, discourse, practices and vision of the organisation. For example, the Collective started to include a monthly Black women-only reflective space. Even though this space was not always comfortable (Nayak, 2015: 94; The Combahee River Collective, 1977: 266) or consistently well-attended, there was a shared sense that ‘[t]hese spaces are not only safe - they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other’ (Hill Collins, 2000:101). This was primarily through a process articulated by hooks as an:

‘ongoing, critical self-examination and reflection about feminist practice, about how we live in the world. This individual commitment, when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a space for critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves new’ (hooks, 1989:24-25).

My experience of sustaining Black feminist collective-working with ‘no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals’ (Lorde, 1980:115) brings to life, and tests, the function of the erotic, explained by Lorde in the following way:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (Lorde, 1978:56)

The Launch of Trafford Rape Crisis Black Women’s Service

The Trafford Rape Crisis Black Women’s Service was launched at an iconic event named, ‘Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory Convention’ (Trafford Rape Crisis, 2012)⁴. Keynote speakers included Sara Ahmed, Gargi Bhattacharyya, Carole Boyce Davies, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sunera Thobani, Hannana Siddiqui from Southall Black Sisters (2013) and Dalia Farah from FORWARD (2002-2013). It should be acknowledged that Ann Phoenix, Gail Lewis and Kum Kum Bhavnani accepted the invitation to speak, but, due to mitigating personal circumstances, were not able to come on the day. Indeed, during the

⁴ On 26th March 2015 Trafford Rape Crisis held another convention called ‘Speaking the Activism of Black Feminism’; keynote speakers included, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (in conversation with Surya Nayak), Ann Phoenix, Amrit Wilson, Aderonke Apata and Shirley Tate.

planning and invitation to keynote speakers I was asked, how did you manage to get these famous keynote speakers to agree to come to Trafford? The implication in the question was based on a hierarchical thinking of how could someone so low down the academic ladder manage to pull off such a prestigious large scale event (in a matter of six months from the initial idea to the actual event). I/we felt it was imperative for Black women in our local communities to hear, experience, meet and talk with these Black feminist thinkers; a deliberate intervention to trouble and question the, membership, construction and borders of academic spaces.

Trafford Rape Crisis was successful in obtaining funding for the event from Feminist Review (2013) and the Psychology of Women Section of the British Psychological Society (2000-2013). We argued our case for the necessity of the convention, with persistent determination and passion, to the Home Office department of the Ministry of Justice. When it looked hopeless and energies were low, we turned to the activism of Black feminist theory seeking out the testimony of Black women's experiences of collective-working (The Combahee River Collective, 1977), and to Lorde. After much hard work and detailed documentation that interweaved the activism of Black feminist theory with Home Office government policy papers (Home Office, 2010; 2011), we managed to shift the position of the Ministry of Justice from one of not being able to see the relevance of the convention in terms of our service provision to a position whereby they agreed to a substantial financial contribution, effectively underwriting the convention.

Indeed, it could be said that the resistance we encountered from outside and inside of the Trafford Rape Crisis forced us to articulate, and bring to life with increasing clarity and confidence, what the activism of Black feminist theory meant to us. More specifically, we articulated, and brought to life, the intersection of 'activism' with 'Black feminist theory'; that is, 'activism' or 'action' that translates into concrete, tangible outputs that produce

outcomes which make a measurable difference to women's lives. Thus, 'Black feminist theory' is brought to life and articulated as the thinking upon which the action is contingent.

The work of Lorde was instrumental in this process, and is evidence of the translation and relevance of her work to current feminist practice and experience. The development, launch and continued sustainability of Trafford Rape Crisis services are an example of the activism of Lorde.

'Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory Convention'

This two-day convention held in Trafford, Manchester (9th March 2012), entitled, 'Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory Convention,' was used to share, and to articulate, the soil of thinking and vision in which Trafford Rape Crisis Black Women's Service was/is rooted, nurtured and grown (<http://traffordrapecrisis.com/Conference.html>). The convention was a mechanism for demonstrating:

- The necessity for dedicated Black women's services;
- That grassroots Black feminist service provision must be developed on a rigorous foundation of the activism of Black feminist theory;
- That service development must grow out of local, national and international consultation, collaboration, situated knowledge and experience;
- That the activism of Black feminist theory is alive, current and relevant to applied practice, the daily lives of people in communities and academic scholarship.

The key objectives of the convention were:

- Scrutiny of the mechanisms used in a racist, homophobic, patriarchal, capitalist society to violate women and girls;
- Examination of the intersectionality of Black feminist theory, activism and the experience of survivors;

- Examination of the activism of Black feminist ‘Theory as Liberatory Practice’ (hooks, 1994:59), picking up the potential of the activism of Black feminist scholarship to confront the violation of women and girls;
- To insist on a direct challenge to the binaries of activism or theory, and experience or scholarship, the convention questioned what counts as theory and who counts as theorist (Christian, 1987);
- To form collective strategies of survival and bridges of resistance against multiple forms of violence against women and girls.

We received the following comments about the convention:

Patricia Hill Collins: *‘I think that it is really important that you and your colleagues have decided to organize this conference. I applaud your initiative.’*

Chandra Talpade Mohanty: *‘I will be there in spirit, since I am sure you will generate some powerful energy at the meeting! In Solidarity, Chandra.’*

Kimberlé Crenshaw: *‘It is of course timely, essential and inspired.’*

Who Count as Theorists?

The question of how to ensure that the convention was fully inclusive of academic and non-academic Black women went to the heart of the purpose of the convention. It was a decisive intervention with the deliberate intention of troubling the power/knowledge relation, recognising that:

‘the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality’ (Foucault, 1981:52).

One of these procedures is to produce those who count as theorists and those who do not count as theorists.

The convention was about the activism of Black feminist theory in order to re-look at what these terms could mean. It provided an opportunity for Black women to undertake the task that Mohanty sets out:

‘I am trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses. As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, that is, the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse’ (Mohanty, 1984:21).

The convention placed emphasis on the ‘links between Black feminism as a social justice project and Black feminist thought as its intellectual center’ (Hill Collins, 2000:xi). In a direct challenge to the binaries of activism or theory, and experience or scholarship, the convention engaged in a re-thinking of Black Women’s activism by interrogating the intersectionality of Black feminist theory and activism as lived experience.

Reaching Out to ALL Women

Too often, the method of reaching ALL women (if it is attempted or considered at all in relation to an academic convention) is to scale down or reduce the size, scope, intellectual content, discourse and language used reflecting all kinds of assumptions, stereotypes and forms of discriminatory attitudes and practices in relation to ‘the other.’ Indeed, I was told repeatedly, by apparently well-meaning feminist academics and activist, that the title of the convention, ‘Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory Convention’ was too complicated, too intellectual, too much for ‘ordinary’ people in our Black communities and

neighbourhoods to understand. I refused to comply with such demeaning stereotypes. In order to reach deep into the community, Trafford Rape Crisis used different methods, including:

- Ensuring that the convention fee did not present a barrier to attendance via the introduction of a ‘contribution’ and ‘free’ places for those who were unable to pay the convention fee;
- Proactive outreach, both formal and informal, through Black Women’s community networks, community centres, and targeting Black working-class, socio-economically marginalised living areas;
- Moving through, in and across spaces that Black Women use in their daily lives, including handing out conference flyers, and generating conversations and curiosity on market corners, streets, cafés, nurseries, libraries, post offices, corner shops, churches, temples, mosques, clinics, schools, colleges, sports centres, hairdressers and shopping centres. In addition, we engaged in door-to-door leafleting and put up posters in public spaces used by Black women;
- Using social networking sites;
- Community and regional radio, and local, regional and national newspapers and broadsheets;
- Hosting the convention in a Trafford-based, accessible, community venue with the provision of transport for specific community groups and individuals who would not have been able to attend without transport or travel expenses. For example, this enabled asylum-seekers and disabled people to attend.

The effectiveness of these strategies was reflected in the number and diversity of the delegates:

- Over half of the delegates at the convention were from local communities, grassroots activist groups and survivors of sexual violence;
- A third of the delegates reported that this was the first convention they had ever attended;
- Two thirds of the delegates identified themselves as Black, Asian or as a minoritised ethnic group;
- The majority of the delegates were women.

Feedback about the convention bears witness to the transformative effects it had on the lives of those who attended, and the ripple effects of this continue to be transformative within communities, amongst colleagues, family members and the service provision. The keynote speeches were captured on a DVD to enable the messages and impact of the convention to continue to ripple.

Opening Speech: ‘Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory’

My name is Suryia Nayak and I work with Trafford Rape Crisis Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic Women’s Services, being launched here today (9th March 2012).

My goodness, here we are, and a brave idea, a courageous vision, becomes a reality. We have our ‘Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory Convention.’ Kay, one of the volunteers at Trafford Rape Crisis, explained to me last week that the word ‘courage’ has in it ‘cor’ - the Latin word for heart - so that ‘courage’ comes to mean ‘inner strength from the heart.’ I stand here today, my heart pounding with pride and immense humility. I want to start by reading out to you part of the invitation we sent across the world to our speakers, here

today, asking them if they would come. I read it to give you an idea of what we wanted to achieve.

This is what I wrote to them:

‘This convention idea has grown out of Black, Asian and Minoritised ethnic women voicing their desire and need for mutual nourishment, inspiration and exchange of intelligence, support and challenge. We want to be able to talk about putting ideas in action; we want to seek the minds of others on really complex, uncomfortable issues we are grappling with. Wouldn’t it be wonderful, and a much needed tonic, to have a space filled with the ‘...“polyrhythms,” the polyvocality of Black women’s creative and critical speech’ (Boyce Davies, 1994:23), and the energy of the activism of Black feminist theory? So, this convention is an expression of our courage to ask for what we want and what we believe we have a right to experience.

Positive replies to this invitation came back literally within hours and are testimony to the importance of this timely intervention. Indeed, even when barriers such as lack of funding confronted us, speakers who are here today from as far as the USA and Canada said they would still be prepared to come, fund themselves, cook and sleep where ever there was space. As the barriers appeared one after another, and I was told in very kind and reasonable words that, perhaps, it was all rather ambitious, perhaps, too divisive, too ‘Black,’ too feminist and, perhaps, too academic, I became even more resolute, even more determined that it would and should happen. Here I am reminded of how Black women and their actions are excess in every sense of Bill Ashcroft’s exploration of the word:

Too much, too long, too many, too subversive, too voluble, too insistent, too loud, too strident, too much-too-much, too complex, too hybrid, too convoluted, too

disrespectful, too antagonistic, too insistent, too insistent, too insistent, too repetitive, too paranoid, too . . . excessive. (Ashcroft, 1994:33; ellipsis in original)

In my role as the Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic Women's Service Development Worker, I am convinced that the service has to be underpinned by a rigorous foundation of thinking. I am convinced that the women we work with need and deserve the very best we can give. This conviction is symbolic of how seriously and passionately we care about the Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic women and girl survivors of sexual violence.

I want to focus for a short while on the title of this event, 'Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory,' because the title captures key elements of the purpose, work and vision of Trafford Rape Crisis. 'Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory' is a rather long, complicated title, intertwining a number of elements that cannot be separated out from each other - just like the long, complicated journey each individual woman survivor of sexual violence travels.

Let's take the word 'declaring': if we go back to its roots, 'declaring' means 'to reveal, disclose and to make witness in public.' Indeed, the word 'declare' draws on the Latin word 'clarus' or 'to make clear, to clarify and to make bright,' invoking the spreading of sound and light. In her essay, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action' (1977), the writer and Black feminist activist, Audre Lorde, said, 'Your silence will not protect you' (Lorde, 1977:41). The work of Trafford Rape Crisis bears witness to the fact that not only does silence fail to protect women, but it also serves to deny the existence of their experiences. Trafford Rape Crisis is about breaking silence - speaking out brightly to make the invisible visible so that the unrecognised is recognised. Audre Lorde goes on to explain how this works. She states:

But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. (Lorde, 1977:41)

Trafford Rape Crisis exists to make declaration about the causes and effects of violation against women; we declare to empower and empower to declare.

Let's focus on the other words of this title. The word 'activism' is inextricably bound up with the word 'theory,' and not just any theory, but the theory or thinking that comes from Black feminism; the often ignored, rich wealth of thinking, writing and declarations that come from the active intelligence, experience and history of Black, Asian and minority ethnic women. 'Active' because it comes out of life, is lived, is alive and is transformative. At Trafford Rape Crisis we take action; we proactively raise consciousness; we expose and dismantle the ideas and the behaviours that legitimize rape and sexual violence. I truly believe that Trafford Rape Crisis is feminist theory in action. Our support work with women survivors of sexual violence is founded upon feminist thinking in order to liberate.

This convention seeks to trouble the distinction between those women who live theory, but, perhaps, do not identify themselves as theorists, and those women who theorise the lived experience and identify themselves as theorists. The convention seeks to create debate and share standpoints of theory (Hill Collins, 2000:252) in order to question what counts as theory and who counts as theorist. In other words, ALL Black, Asian and minoriticised ethnic women are important thinkers; we are theorising all day, every day. The convention is about the activism of Black feminist theory in order to re-look at what these terms could mean.

The daily reality of living with the effects of racism and sexism, mixed up with other pressures such as poverty, disability and homophobia, is exhausting. The ways in which women are physically, emotionally and sexually violated, and survive these experiences, need to be understood in relation to racism and those other weights of oppression that press us down. Audre Lorde describes it in this way:

There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.
(Lorde, 1980:115)

In other words, Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic women survivors of this racist, homophobic, capitalist patriarchy have specific issues and needs which require specific strategies, specific knowledge and specific forms of action as a foundation for altering the present and constructing futures that enable us to realise our potential.

This event marks an important milestone in Trafford in the provision of a specialist service for Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic women and girls who have experienced sexual violence, and the emotional and physical abuse that is so often part of this violation. This specialist service is open to all women and girls, whether their experience happened a long time ago, recently or is currently happening to them. What we do know is that sexual violence takes many forms; for example, forced marriage, rape, ritual abuse, pornography, female genital mutilation and sexual harassment. At Trafford Rape Crisis we work with all forms of sexual violence.

The formation and work of Trafford Rape Crisis began two years ago by a few committed, passionate and tireless women. Now, we have premises, helpline services, e-mail support services, information leaflets, undertake outreach and have close partnerships with voluntary, private and statutory services. We have carried out pioneering work with a group

called, 'Change,' to create materials that are accessible for learning-disabled women, we have a Collective of over 40 trained volunteers, and the capacity to deliver training and raise awareness about the emotional, psychological and practical needs of women and girl survivors of sexual violence. Today, we are launching a dedicated service for Black, Asian and minority ethnic women, including a specific helpline and e-mail support.

The formation of Trafford Rape Crisis is testimony to the power of women coming together to make something happen for the liberation of other women and girls. It is truly inspirational. We are a Collective of the most diverse group of women you can imagine in terms of age, race, class, sexuality, skills and knowledge. We are ambitious, strong, resourceful, visionary and resolute. Into this mix, we are first and foremost woman-centred; this is a service by women for women. It is a service that women and girls can use, confident that they will be believed, they will be heard and they will be supported through their particular journey.

At Trafford Rape Crisis we use the speech act (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969, 1975) - the activism of speaking out as a tool of feminism to spread sound and light on our thinking about the ways in which racism is inextricably linked to the violation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic women. At Trafford Rape Crisis we understand something of what the feminist writer, Judith Butler, meant when she said, '[w]hat does it mean for a word not only to name, but also in some sense to perform and, in particular, to perform what it names' (Butler, 1997:214).

We use the speech act to re-position, to re-locate and re-orientate blame, shame and responsibility away from the woman survivor of sexual violence. At the heart of what we do on the helpline, in our outreach work, training and campaigning is breaking silence - speaking

out and enabling women and girls to say the unsayable, and give voice about what has happened to them.

These are the kinds of things we hear as we support women and undertake outreach work: 'I cannot say the words'; 'I have never told anyone'; 'if I talked, no one would believe me'; 'to talk about it would bring shame on my family'; 'to put into words, to say the words, would make it real - it would mean that it really happened.'

We can see from these examples that silence is used as a powerful tool in sexual violence. Silence operates on an individual, family, community, societal and global level. Silence is a powerful and clever tool for a number of reasons:

- Silence regulates and controls;
- Silence shifts the shame and blame from the abuser to the abused;
- Silence isolates;
- Silence legitimises sexual violence;
- Silence means that sexual violence is not talked about openly, it becomes taboo;
- Silence drives the violation of women and girls underground, behind closed doors;
- Silence - that which is unsayable, which cannot be given voice to, that which is prohibited from speech - masks the prevalence and the effects of rape and sexual abuse;
- Silence about sexual violence causes and exacerbates mental distress and emotional turmoil, resulting in numerous mental health difficulties;

- Silence prevents women and girls living in Trafford from feeling safe, confident and secure. In other words, silence about sexual violence has an impact on all areas of life;
- Silence robs women and girls of the transformational effect of speaking out. Breaking silence is core to the recovery process;
- Silence robs women and girls from collective action and awareness. We could say that silence operates a kind of ‘divide and rule’ because it separates, fragments and isolates instead of allowing the strength of multiple voices to sound out loud and clear - to make a noise that can no longer be ignored;
- Silence about sexual violence is not good for all members of all communities who live within Trafford. It is not good for all members of all communities living across the world, whether they be men, women or children.

Rape Crisis centres throughout the country and Trafford Rape Crisis in particular, are founded on breaking silence; it is all about having voice.

Our knowledge and understanding about the power of giving voice has a history in the women’s liberation movement that goes back to the idea of ‘speaking out.’ On a Sunday afternoon in January, 1971 in America, over 30 women gave public testimony to their experiences of the abuse of power through sexual violence. This was called a ‘speak out event’ and was the first of its kind (Brownmiller, 1993; 1999:199-200). Following in the tradition of this inspiring event in 1971, today, on the 9th March, 2012, we are going to enact our own ‘speak out’ and I invite our women to speak.⁵

⁵ At this part of the speech, with the invitation to speak out, six different members of Trafford Rape Crisis, who were sitting throughout the audience, stood up one by one and performed a ‘speak out event,’ reading the testimonies of women survivors of sexual violence.

I declare the activism of 'Trafford Rape Crisis Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic Women's Service.'

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