



# Black Women Violence and Abuse: Working beneath the intersections of race, gender and other oppressions

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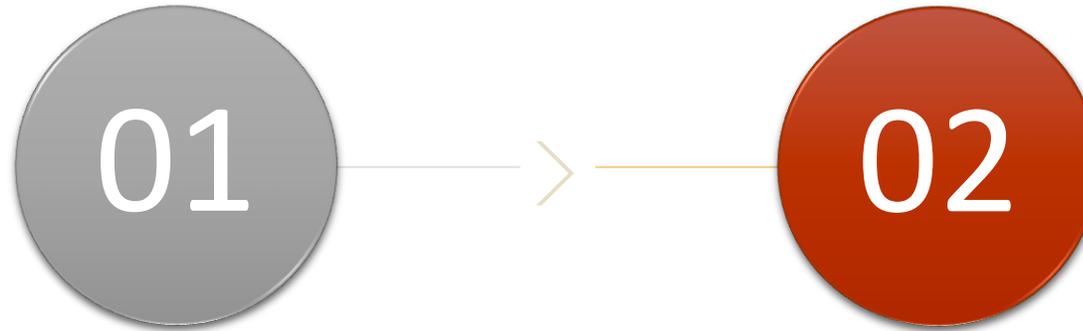
'Continuum of oppression'  
Racism, racialisation, body-  
shaming and being silenced  
explains delayed help-  
seeking among Black  
British women/communities  
(2014 - 2018).



All the memories from  
the previous occupier are there,  
the nicotine on the walls, which  
is a lot [laughs]. I need to make  
it into my own. (Rebecca)

Gap in empirical studies on black women's lived experiences in the UK in general  
and in particular on violence and abuse. 'Normalised absence, pathologised  
presence' (Phoenix, 1987).

Studies from the USA and UK have found that black women who internalise  
'controlling images': hypersexual; unrapeable and strong, delay seeking help for  
violence and abuse (Washington, 2001; Wilson, 1993; Wyatt, 1985).



How is race and ethnicity  
embodied for Black women  
and how is this related to  
their help seeking for  
violence and abuse?

What are Black women's  
embodied experiences of  
space and place when coping  
with, seeking and receiving  
help?

# Literary Narratives

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Abuse from mothers

Household chores inappropriate for young age

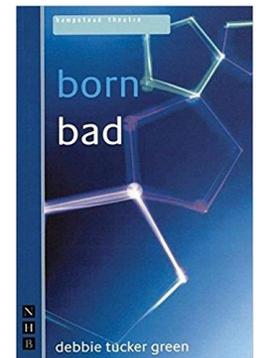
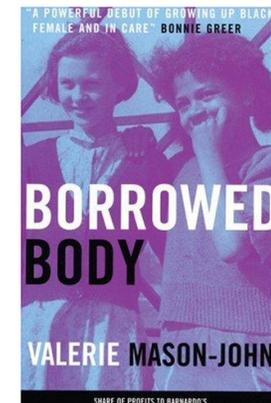
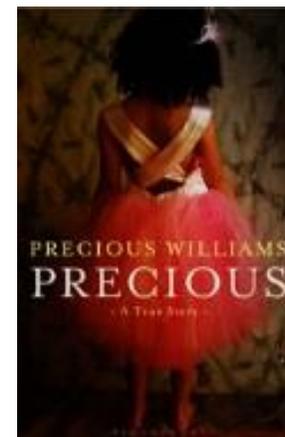
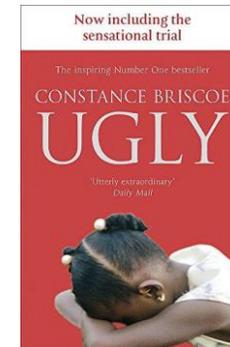
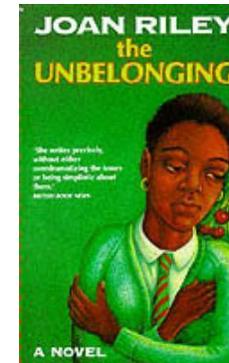
Racialised sexual abuse

Made to feel ugly

Caught between cultures of home and here; racism

Being silenced

Resurrection of 'the dead black girl' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.



# Intersections: faith, culture and abuse

I think people don't like to admit that [child sexual abuse] happens quite a lot, it happened to me ... especially in the church, people have gotta keep things quiet in there ... I was really disappointed over the years how family members didn't believe me, I think my brother didn't believe me either, but he's a perp[etrator]. He was like how could I sleep at his [grandfather's] house. I feel betrayed really a lot of the time. (Patricia)

I remember when I told him I was at [tube station], we were in [place] even though I did not know the names of those stations, [tube station] was the first station that I ever remembered. We went to our house and the room was black. He didn't even put on the light. I was sitting on the bed and he was sitting on a chair. He made me tell him every detail, literally. [T]hen he took the Quran and he opened it and he said, 'If you put your hand on it [the Quran] and you're lying, you're gonna go to hell'. I knew I could do that, because I knew that I was telling the truth, so I actually put my hand on it [the Quran]. I told my ex-husband that I've been sexually abused and he was sympathetic to that. Later on I had to tell him that I lied. (Farah)

# Expectations of strength at home

E: [W]ithin my family it is all about protecting mum. Protecting this strong Black woman ... we stay together and we project what we want others to think.

I: You mentioned this term strong Black woman.

E: My just trying to heal from it [sexual abuse], is her [mum] idea of dwelling on it and she thinks what strong people do, and what she has done, is put it behind them. That's a kind of strength, but how she's dealing with it is not dealing with it, but that's her definition. I think that within our culture we are taught to be strong, not to show weakness and to laugh at our children, to toughen and give the kids a beating.

I: And do you also think being strong is related to not talking about...

E: Not talking about it ... not dealing with it really. (E: Evelyn)

I don't think people really wanted to believe it ... I am sorry to say, but when it comes to Black people, they don't really want to appreciate that things can happen really bad in any of their communities and just as White ... like in any other community ... [S]omeone said to me 'Black people don't do those things [child sexual abuse]' ... I've noticed that there are many women who have suffered experiences and the same thing as well and some of it worse [giggles nervously] ... but they don't want to talk about it ... 'no it's not Black people, it only happens to White people'. (Rebecca)

# Expectations outside the home (1)

I: [W]hat does being a Black woman mean to you?

P: I feel like what it means to me is I feel is a pathology ... just being a minority ... for example at a meeting ... I often have a lot of heads around me are White and I'm probably gonna be the only one there that's Black and then it feels like I'm a minority. I like being Black, I like difference and I like having my heritage that is different from everybody else's.

I: Would you say then that it's more of a feeling you get when you're in particular environments? Is it just in general when you leave your house, or is it just in specific environments?

P: I think in professional environments, I feel different in professional environments. When I'm out, I don't feel anything really, but I enjoy being different. (P: Patricia)

[T]here are lots of obstacles ... no matter how hard you try to sugar coat it and have a positive attitude ... we are living in a society where people will look at you and judge, just on your appearance. And sometimes when I go to festivals and other places, and there are White faces there, plenty of White faces ... I mean in some ways they're rounding me up ... although I will try to overlook it ... [A]s a Black woman you are caught up in this sexism and you may be caught up in this racism, which is people's opinions and people's attitudes affecting you ... [T]he term brings out negative connotations. The first things you can think of; racism and sexism, baby mother, single mother, strong-willed or stubborn. (Rebecca)

# Expectations outside of the home (2)

With friends who are English, I sound like them, so there are certain arguments that they are not used to having in front of me, but I'm not like them ... I said you can't have a conversation to me about colour and ... expect my view to be the same as your view, because our experiences are completely different. For me there is a difference between just being a woman and being a Black woman, I definitely think that you are faced with more obstacles. (Ellen)

[T]he expectations are ... you don't get pregnant, you get a good job, you get an education and actually the expectations of being a Black woman and of being a Black West Indian woman I would say are a lot higher than being a Black West Indian boy ... I've always found within families, and it's not just my family ... oh you're a girl child, you have to do this ... I'm sure there is an unsaid world isn't it ... you're not pretty enough, your hair's not long enough, you're not fair enough, all these other things that sew into it ... if you spoke to most West Indian families they have a lot higher expectations for their daughters, than their sons. (Norma)

# Seeking support...

The shame comes from the conditioning that you grew up with ... maybe from being a minority and feeling judged ... I used to feel like I'm being judged and maybe my lifestyle is being judged. When you do go for help, the majority is from an outsider culture ... So it might make things feel more acute, but then I've also experienced therapy from a Black woman and it still felt the same [laughs] it's still there [laughs]. [Y]ou have these expectations that I'm a woman and I'm supposed to know what to think and what to do and I mustn't speak my business unless I'm with Black people [laughs], you feel at a loss and you don't feel [any] power there. (Evelyn)

# Not Black Enough

[laughs] I always listen to opera and classical music, so that makes me less Black and, psychology is a main thing for me. I wanna be a therapist and that's just yeah [slows pace of speech] oo:kaa:ay, not Black ... [Y]ou know being Black has to be a set of rules and you have to get with that set. Being [country of origin] I have to get with that set of rules and I don't judge myself by any of them and being Muslim. I have to get with another set of rules and I don't like either. I've kinda been rejected by just about everybody. I think being White also comes with certain things. I don't think they will accept me either [laughs] so I would say in all honesty, I'm like whatever. So being me is just being in the middle of everything, having all my mixed cultures, and problems and just say hey, I'm on my own. (Farah)

# Nugatory self

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Fanon (1952) body schema split into 'triple person' by racial abuse.

Ahmed (2000; 2004; 2007) boundaries created between strangers and neighbours, whiteness/others in public spaces.

Participants described not belonging, feeling: 'less-than'; 'like a pathology'; 'like a minority'; 'not Black enough'; felt after responses to hair/hairstyles.



# A continuum of oppression

Sexual violence is on a continuum of behaviours: sexual harassment, unwanted sexual touching, rape that occurs across contexts, to the same or different women (Kelly, 1988).

Black women experience a continuum of sexual violence as well as everyday racism, poverty, migration (Davis, 2000; Roy, 2008; Wallace, 1979).

Intersectionality maps where Black women are socially located and the processes that allow their experiences of violence to be seen and not seen and their opportunities and constraints for help (Crenshaw, 1991).

Continuum of oppression maps where and violence/abuse occurred, and who did what to whom.



# Silencing women and girls

Literary narratives from Black British authors (Briscoe, 2009; Mason-John, 2005; Williams, 2011)

Multiple layers of silencing: familial, cultural, public, private, abusers (Jordan, 2012; Tyagi, 2001; Serrant-Green, 2011)

Speaking is about the capacity of the audience to hear (Ahmed, 2010; Fricker, 2008).

# Black Women, Violence and Abuse: Working Beneath the Intersections of race, gender and other oppressions

Dr Joanne Wilson

‘Spaces to Speak’ of Sour Milk:  
Exploring African-Caribbean-British  
Women’s Activism and Agency on  
Childhood Sexual Abuse from the  
1980s to the Present Day

# Aims of Study & Data Collection

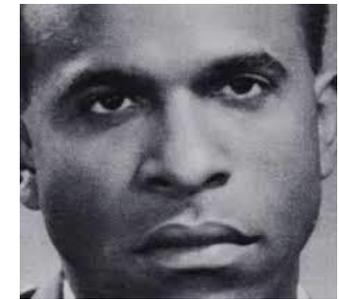
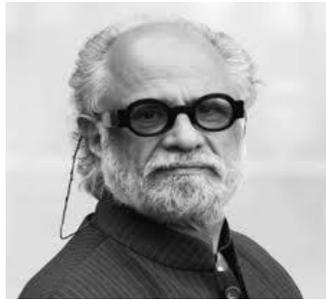
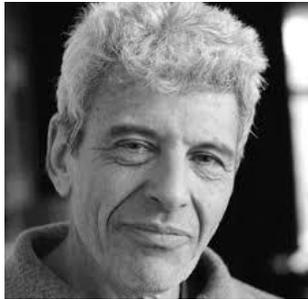
## Aims

- Reclaim and analyse activism by Black British women on the issue child sexual abuse in the late 1980s/early 1990s
- Explain the decline in attention, service provision and research attention to ACB CSA survivors
- Discover how ACB survivors cope and make sense of their experiences
- Add the British perspective to what we know on child sexual abuse (CSA) and racialisation
- Outline unmet needs with respect to service provision and suggest how these might best be met.

## Methods

- 12 Semi-structured in-depth interviews with Black British Feminists activists on CSA from 1980's (Experts) and African-Caribbean British victim-survivors
- Content Analysis of: "Spare Rib", "Outwrite", "Off Our Backs" feminist periodicals from U.S and UK 1980's-1995
- Literature Review- CSA and Race
- Survey with Rape Crisis Centres (RCC's)
- Auto-ethnographic

# Methodology: Where are we?





## Black British Feminists (Experts) & CSA

- Belief by White British feminists of public activism on CSA by Black British Feminists
- Child Abuse Studies Unit (CASU) Conference 1987 (Marlene Bogle)
- “Crossing the Boundaries: Black Women Survive Incest” (Melba Wilson)

Political Becomes  
the Personal:  
Race Supersedes  
Gender

*Interestingly, it wasn't an issue that surfaced through the black women's group, because it was just too hot. Too much of a hot potato really; and we were dealing with loads of hot potatoes. We weren't dealing with the personal.*

*I had also been having conversations with other black women and it was like, "Yeah but we can't talk about this, we can't air our dirty linen in public" and you know in the black community, that's a real big thing; full stop. But also, because issues around racism you know? To talk about all that stuff going on in the black communities was highly dangerous, and left it open to misinterpretation.*

*- EID1*

## Racism and the neglect of 'Self': CSA a Secondary Concern

*We organised around a number of key issues, the SUS laws which were laws which at the time young black boys were being stopped and searched a lot in Brixton.*

*Black mothers, black sisters were saying we have got to do something about this. So, we did a lot of demonstrating outside Brixton Police station and elsewhere to say this practice has got to stop; you're targeting of black children basically. So that was one of the campaigns we waged.*

*Another one was around sinbins to get rid of the practice of excluding black children, again black boys, from schools and sticking them in these, kind of no hope institutions where very little was expected of them.*

*We campaigned around the Police Criminal Evidence Bill. We campaigned against virginity testing at Heathrow Airport.*

- EID1



## Intersectional Abuse (Crenshaw, 1991)

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She said, she just didn't want to recognise it. Because when he came into our life, he owned his own business, he had money and we weren't poor anymore! So, I think if she got rid of him, we would be poor again. That's what I think, she hasn't said that; that is my opinion because we had everything, we had a PlayStation, a big TV, you know we had big whole psyche hi-fi, we had chairs. Because before him it was carpet that didn't fit the floor; we all slept in the front room... *So, I just think it might have been slightly living a comfortable life and she didn't want to give it up* [Voice drops very low] (Ciara).

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When I was little, we used to live in a one-bedroom council flat... I slept in the bed with them. We only had one bedroom, so I watched my Mum, and Dad having sex (Angel).

# Protection of Black Male/African- Caribbean British Communities

## No Space to Speak!

...Because I know because of the police that's why I wouldn't speak. That scares me especially with the black community, because they are racist toward us (police) (Angel)

*I think so because you are pointing the finger at your own again. Saying that this is what the black man do; and they didn't have a good word to say about the black man in the first place. So, they were cussing him out and putting him down and here you are as a black woman doing the same thing. It's a guilt trip! [voice rises with frustration]. You know what I mean? (EID2)*

- 'Dissemblance' –(Hammond, E., 1997)
- Black man represents African-Caribbean British communities (in race politics)

# Overcome...No Space to Speak 'Outside'

*I think one of the fears that we do have is fear of being judged (Sharon)*

*... because black families, black people get such a negative press the last thing you want to be writing is about those awful things that happen in families, and particularly black families...You write about the good things about black families, you don't write about the violence and abuse that goes on in black families because it's an opportunity for racists to grab it and say, "We were right all along. Black families are just dysfunctional". So, I think there's an avoidance (EID4).*

## No Space to Speak: 'Inside Communities'

	Response to Disclosure
<b>Sar</b>	After disclosure mother focused on abuser not daughter. Has not spoken of sexual abuse since.
<b>Bianca</b>	Mother has not spoken of sexual abuse to date.
<b>Maria</b>	Father beat brother (abuser). Mother discovered abuse but has not spoken of it since. Called Maria a liar.
<b>Ciara</b>	Mother supported abuser. Beat daughter badly.
<b>Porsha</b>	Initially supported by family. Abuse characteristic (anal rape) prevents parents from speaking of abuse since disclosure by police.
<b>Angel</b>	Sexual abuse on-going into present.
<b>Sharon</b>	Mother and abuser beat her. Shamed publicly to family and friends.

# Overcome...No Space to Speak: Inside Cont'd

I think it's the black way. Because going back generations and generations, the set up just seems to be like, in order to get through anything, it's best not to confront the issue it's best not to deal with the issue. It's best just to put it one side and overcome it... (Porscha)

It is because you've got to show face. Even when everything is bad.! My mum always told me; what was it she told me? She said, "boil stones; pretend that you are cooking soup" because nobody outside needs to know that you don't have no food in the house for example. So yeah, you've got to pretend that things are okay even if they are not, whilst inside is killing you (Ciara).

- Overcoming racism informed victim-survivors/parents of how to live with CSA

Mistrust:  
Feminism & State  
  
the Desire for  
Autonomous  
Activism

*Inequality and racism not only from the white man but from our very own white women too. You know? Although we were women together, we were separated by the colour of our skin, our cultural background. Culture, everything separated us. I don't think they could see where we were coming from, although we were more sympathetic to their needs, they weren't to ours at all (EID2).*

*What was important and again that was a point of tensions; because clearly we were a black feminist group. We didn't want to be subsumed within the white feminist movement... clearly there was strength in numbers and we needed to work together but we needed to organize autonomously (EID1).*

Combahee River Collective Statement (1978).

## Mistrust of State



Yes because we don't really trust white people. A lot of black people don't trust white people. they put the white man into one category. the government, the mayor and normal white people in the same category (Ciara).

- Public, legislative policies deemed discriminatory fuels mistrust on interpersonal levels between white and black communities
- 1962 Immigration Act/ Virginty Testing at Heathrow
- Hostile Environment / Structural Racism and COVID-19
- Racial mistrust barrier to victim-survivors accessing sexual violence support services

# Liminal Positionings Citizenship & Belonging

- African- Caribbean British women Slip through the gaps of Gender and Race politics
- (White, 2001; Wallace, 1990; Davis, 1992)
- Occupy a liminal space; Always Emergent (Subjecthood struggles to emerge); (Turner, 1969 ; Bhabha, 1994)
- Reproduction of 'Strong Black Woman' (Maternal Mimesis)
- (Beaubouef-Lafontant, 2009; Wilson, 2016)

# Citizenship & Belonging

No, no, I believe we are citizens, but we don't feel it. I don't know I just feel with communities a lot of negative things are... a lot of negative things are thrown.

- Bianca

Then we were children of immigrants, now we are very much, well our children are very much part, they are black British children. They aren't children of no immigrants. They are very much part of this society and they (white society) need to start recognising, feeling and owning it. We are very much integrated, born here, your parents were born here, and your Grandparents were born here. So come on now let's live in the real world and be part of this society.

- EID2

## Belonging Cont'd

I want to feel that I belong because I was born here...doing a census and they said, no you are not black British you are Caribbean. I wasn't born in the Caribbean I was born here. (Angel)

I don't think so. I think underlining there is a sense of great animosity that we don't feel a sense of we belong here (Porscha)

# Strong Black Woman

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I feel that it is the culture. When you are brought up being told, “oh you know be strong, stop the crying; what are you crying for?” ... It has been constantly put into your head that you need to be strong, you need to deal with it; don't cry. So, you are brought up with that way of thinking, so you bring it into for example your abuse. You know you just deal with it. Don't cry! (Ciara)

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Because black women are always portrayed by how strong we are, how we can deal with anything. You know beat us, we get up again, we go to work, we take care of the family, we are strong, matriarchal... I think another reason why it has been difficult to see black people telling their stories and black women telling their stories especially, has been because of this mantle that we wear as black women as being strong, as being able to handle it all, which has been given to us historically. (EID1)

# Strong Black Woman Cont'd

No outside of black we will always hang on to that; being strong. I think all the while in the UK that black women face the kind of racism that we do, and all the while we are on the sharp end of all sorts of things; the cuts (economic) are a good example, of that... we will always have that sense that we need to be stronger, and we are not; but we don't chat our business about town (EID3)

The sensitivity and the emotion, is deemed as a weakness. That's what weakness is... But like for me, I just see it as a coping mechanism for like the culture that I am coming from. Like you know, it's like being hard and being strong is just getting on with things, you know? (Porscha)

# Summary: Maternal Mimesis

- Racism and racialisation inform victim-survivors of how to live with CSA
- No 'Space to speak' of CSA in or outside of community in order to protect community/ Black male
- Mistrust of society; women especially white women becomes barrier to seek support for sexual abuse experiences due
- No sense of political representation within gender and race politics in the UK
- Occupy a liminal space as racialised women
- Continued Intersectional abuse(s) creates sense of futility to victim-survivors
- 'Strong Black woman' stereotype (re)produced inter-generationally as living experiences of CSA

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# How to include unexpected narratives in supporting victim-survivors

- Within (super) diverse western contexts narratives about sexual violence/abuse are anchored within women's positionality (A).
- We can expect accounts of the sexual violence/abuse, but these may not be the only forms of abuse/violence and intrusion women experience (J).
- Forms of violence/abuse are distinguishable/same, but impact feels the same 'continuum of oppression' (A).
- Sexual violence/abuse for African/Caribbean heritage women can be one of many forms and can also be racialised; 'sexy Black ass' (A).
- Women are constantly sense-making racialisation, gender and the collective superseding the personal, in experiences; 'maternal mimesis', robbed of possibility of potential selves (J).
- Limited spaces to speak, support for sexual/violence/abuse should include issues related to positionality for women who are minoritised in diverse ways (J).



# A road.....



I think what I'm trying to signify here is just how far ... I've come from where I was born and raised ... so to anybody, they will look at this picture and just think, this is a picture of any road in England, but to me it's so:0 far from where I was born and raised and everything that's happened ... within the space of time, having gone abroad, worked abroad ... qualified as a professional, getting married, having kids ... [S]o much happened to me in that space of time and yes it looks like any other road, but it isn't, it's just so far ... from where I began. (Norma)

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