Hello

My name is Patricia Francis. I'm a doctoral student in the Arts and Humanities and Visual Culture department at Nottingham Trent University. My research explores how I might, without 'objectifying' or 'othering', give volume and primacy to dissenting women's voices using documentary film and creative directorial practice.

The title of this paper *And Some of Us are Silenced,* is influenced by the book *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* edited by Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith in 1982. For me it remains a valuable contribution to Black women's studies. Hull and Smith wrote:

> Merely to use the term "Black women's studies" is an act charged with political significance. At the very least, the combining of these words to name a discipline means taking the stance that Black women exist—
> and-exist positively—-a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North

> American continent. To use the term and to act on it in a white-male world is an act of political courage[1].

Whilst the book's focus is on African American experiences many of the issues addresses, as its title signals, the courage of speaking about Black women's realities. In Britain Black feminists put women at *The Heart of the Race*, the title that Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe took for their collective study of Black women's lives in Britain in 1985.

Black women are still not seen or portrayed on equitable terms, as evidenced by the disproportionate amount of social media abuse Diane Abbot has to manage as a politician; the police and public response to the tragic killing of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman in contrast to that of Sarah Everard, and how Black women still have to navigate their way through racist tropes of the 'aggressive Black woman' or the 'over-sensitive Black woman' or the 'strong Black woman' on occasions when they dare to challenge the status quo.

[1] Akasha Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, 'The Politics of Black Women's Studies', in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott & Barbara Smith (eds), *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (University of New York: Feminist Press 1982), xvii-xxxiv (xvii).

I'll give some social context first. The 1980s was a politically charged period with high unemployment rates among racialised groups; the impact of the SUS law on the Black community and the ongoing threat of violence from the National Front were just some of the political issues that fuelled unrest in England. Under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the first female leader of the Conservative government, civil unrest was widespread. From the Brixton and Toxteth riots in 1981 that led to uprisings taking place across the country, the Falklands war with Argentina in 1982, the Miners' strike in 1984 that saw brutal confrontation between the miners and the police, to the IRA conflict with bombs planted in mainland UK. England was in a state of disharmony.

In 1975, the Equality Act became law. Ironically in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came to power, there was an overall fall in the number of women Members of Parliament with the majority of her advisers and cabinet colleagues being men. Susan Bassnet is among feminists who have argued that Thatcher's government influenced women to stay at home rather than enter the workplace. - she wrote: *'[I]t has been amongst the Conservative government under Thatcher that voices have begun to question the right of women to work at all. Arguing for the need to keep as many men in employment as possible, the government has raised the old chestnut about*

women's true role being in the family, though the irony of such views being expressed by a government led by a woman who is the mother of two children does not seem to have been noticed.'[2]

It was also Margaret Thatcher who, in a television interview for the ITV investigative current affairs programme *World in Action*, suggested, and I quote; "*people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture, and you know the British culture has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world, that if there's any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.* "[3] This kind of divisive inflammatory statement also fuelled the wave of social disorder that occurred across the country.

That women have played major roles in the civil unrest is often under-played, hinted at or ignored. For example, the women's role in the 1984 Miners' strike is often considered in the setting up of soup kitchens, compiling food parcels and ensuring that the men and children were fed. However, the women,

[2] Susan Bassnett, *Feminist Experiences. The Women's Movement in Four Cultures* (London: Allen & Unwin 1986, 136.
[3] Margaret Thatcher interview, *World in Action,* online video recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JR9X6FkkOeY> [accessed August 4 2021].

particularly those involved in the Nottinghamshire strike, are seldom acknowledged for their activism *on* the picket lines, in fund-raising and by speaking at rallies. The oral history interviews I have undertaken brings this out. One contributor asserted that the women's involvement influenced the longevity of the strike: "The strike wouldn't have stayed on as long as it did without the women" she told me," I think the men would have given up and went back."[4] The wives of miners were defiant in their actions and their intention to defeat Margaret Thatcher and her government's denunciation of the strike, but their voices were seldom given volume then and often drowned out by political disquiet and picket line battles. Black women were also dissenting, and whilst their works shouted of a racial and gendered inequity and assertion for change, their voices remained almost inaudible, over-powered by their communities' concerns over the poor educational achievement of young Black boys, for example; the disproportionately high numbers of Black men and boys being stopped and searched by the police, and the deplorable number of Black deaths that occurred in police custody.

An underlying observation in the case of the strike and racist policing, is that women were and are displaced.

[4] 'Transcript of an interview between Patricia Francis and a miner' wife, February 1 2019.

There is welcome representation of Black defiance in *Mangrove,* the first of the *Small Axe* films*,* when student Altheia Jones-LeCointe says: "*We need to challenge the system… We mustn't be victims but protagonists of our stories and what better way of representing ourselves but self-representing ourselves."*[5] A bold, incisive statement then and now. There are multiple roles for women across the Small Axe films: They are mothers, teenage girls, lesbians as well as straight, educators and nurses but the emphasis is on women as carers, nurturers, and sexual beings. Steve McQueen's pentalogy does not offer a challenge to the social and political positioning of Black women - viewing the films now. Instead, in the process of constructing films around Black male protagonists, he risks reinforcing traditional, patriarchal and racist conceptions. Altheia might be considered a contradiction to this notion. This strong female character is clearly confident and assertive, but she is also pregnant and with this knowledge viewers' perceptions shift from her activism to her impending role as nurturer and carer for her newborn child and the danger activism may pose to that. Altheia is not a main character in the film. The story is not about her, and the sorry fact about this pentalogy is that

[5] *Mangrove*, dir. by Sir Steve McQueen (Turbine Studios and Lammas Park Production, 2020), online film recording, BBC iPlayer, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08vy19b> [accessed August 1 2021].

not one of McQueen's films tells a strong, progressive story of a Black British woman.

Education is about a nurse and a mother striving for the best education she can get for her son. *Red, White and Blue* is based on the true story of retired superintendent Leroy Logan and how he navigated a racist Metropolitan Police force. *Alex Wheatly* is based on the male author of young adult fiction and his experiences before achieving success in that role. *Lovers Rock* is a dramatisation of blues parties in the 1980s, held as a consequence of Black people not being admitted into mainstream clubs. This particular film risks portraying Black women as deceitful and promiscuous.

The 1979 hit *Silly Games' by* Janet Kay features significantly and repetitively in *Lovers Rock* as it did on the reggae scene at that time. Viewers are transported back to the claustrophobic racist control of the state and the words "*You're as much to blame, 'cos I know you feel the same*…" have profound social and political relevance here as Black men and women whine and entwine, moving as one to the reggae rhythm. But they are not as one. McQueen acknowledges systemic racism and portrays it, yet in his *Small Axe films he* fails to advocate

for ‘Black sistahs’ and instead his pentalogy carries ‘the burden’ for Black men only.

Not one of the five *Small Axe* films is dedicated to any of the many Black women active in the struggle for equality and change in the UK. They existed and they were visible. Women such as Moira Stuart – Britain’s first Black female news reader on our screens most nights, Diane Abbott - Britain’s first Black British female Member of Parliament. Less visible women, like Professor Shirley Thompson the first woman in Europe to have composed and conducted a symphony within the last 40 years all, I would argue, offer compelling narratives. Surely a woman’s story could have qualified as a main source for at least one of the five Small Axe films. It was disappointing that dramatisation and documentation of ‘the burden of representation’ could not have extended into the multiple experiences of Black women in Britain in any detail. The screen time of Black actresses is also limited when their stories are backgrounded.

Surely more should be expected from a Black Writers’ Room that is creating stories about injustice and racial discrimination in the 1980s? Black men were not alone in being turned away from night clubs, it was not only Black men

who were assaulted or beaten up in the back of police cars. Black women were involved in the nationwide uprisings and activist struggles in the fight for equality. Nevertheless, it would seem that the men in this writing arena, did not consider Black women's stories could be sufficiently engaging for a prime time BBC1 audience.

A Royal Television Society article suggested that Helen Bart, and I quote, 'a former West Indian BBC News journalist was busy uncovering the stories of everyday people in the 1960s, '70s and '80s.'[6] End of quote. Of the one-hundred-and-twenty-six interviews she conducted is it really conceivable that not one of them was strong enough to inspire a narrative retelling with a woman at the centre, as protagonist not victim?

In an online interview with *Esquire,* McQueen named Alistair Siddons and Courttia Newland as co-writers of *Lovers Rock* and *Red, White and Blue* and Alex Wheatley and Alistair Siddons as co-writers of *Alex Wheatley, Education* and *Mangrove.*[7] All men. By this account Black British women were not even

[6] Shilpa Ganatra, 'Small Axe: The real Black British experience', November 2020, available on the *Royal Television Society* website at https://rts.org.uk/article/small-axe-real-black-british-experience (viewed August 2 2021).

[7] *Steve McQueen on George Floyd, Racist Inequality in the UK and His New Series, 'Small* Axe', Esquire with B Brietling Townhouse, November 11 2020 online video recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySnOSrQeDLU> [accessed August 1 2021].

present in that creative space to write and develop stories alongside them. When society is being admonished for under-representation in board rooms, on recruitment panels, in the media and at the Oscars, for example, how could there be such an oversight?

In his study of Black popular cultural forms in *Welcome to the Jungle* (1994), Kobena Mercer noted;

> The impact of black women's voices in the early eighties heralded the pluralization of black identities that would become a key theme throughout the decade. From autonomous organisations formed in the late 1970s, such as the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), to AWAZ (meaning "voice"), and Southall Black Sisters, to C.L.R Jame's 1981 lecture at the Riverside Studios, urging us to read Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara…[8]

Nearly three decades ago Black women's contribution to the social and political struggle was being acknowledged, a contribution that continues today

[8] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, (New York: Routledge 1994), 11.

as evidenced, not least, by the Black Lives Matter Movement, set up in 2013 by three Black women in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012.[9] By 2015, the first Black Lives Matter chapter in Europe was set up in Nottingham. Indeed, Black women have and continue to challenge neo-colonial and patriarchal systems that marginalise communities. They bore and continue to bear the burden of representation and are inclusive. In 1988, five years before Steve McQueen made his film *Bear* (1993), Ngozi Onwurah made *Coffee Coloured Children* (1988), a film that featured her brother and poetically describes the emotional trauma of racial harassment growing up with dual heritage in Britain. In 1986 Maureen Atwood co-directed *The Passion of Remembrance* as part of Sankofa Film and Video Collective. It imaginatively explores race, class and gender and speaks of the plurality of the Black experience. The 1980s saw the Black Arts movement that included artists such as Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers who were creating works inspired by anti-racist and feminist discourse. Himid's *We Will Be* in 1983 and Boyce's *Big Women's Talk* in 1984 used art to conceive a space that represented and re-presented Black women's experiences. Such opportunity to have a voice was limited then, as

[9] Note: Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi were the founding members of the movement.

noted by the character Maggie in *Passion of Remembrance*. Referring to under-representation on British television during the 1980s, she said:

> Every time a Black face appears we think it has to represent the whole race. We don't have the space to get it wrong that's the problem.[10]

Maureen Blackwood worked with Isaac Julien on that film. Cooperation and collaboration was key as it was in the Black Audio Film Collective.
It offered a collective narrative.

Prime time Sunday evening viewing across five weeks offered McQueen the opportunity to give volume to Black women's voices; to offer an account that countered stereotypical, racist and sexist narratives... He did not take it... In these films the voices of Black British women remained muted.

In *Mangrove* when Frank Critchlow asks Altheia "What are we fighting for?" She responds defiantly, "*For my unborn child… It counts beyond us here… I'm*

[10] *Passion of Remembrance*, dir. by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien (Sankofa Film and Video Collective, 1986).

not just here defending myself but trying to defend all of us."[11] The burden Black women bear has not been and is not limited to their gender. It is borne for their communities. Whilst this understanding is made evident in the script for *Mangrove*, it is unfortunate that McQueen and his writers did not consider that more fully in this instance.

The five films offered wonderful insight into an aspect of the lived experiences of Black Britons. However, by not offering a place from which Black British women's voices could resonate and failing to imagine or construct a narrative that aligns more closely with their realities, McQueen bore 'the burden' for Black men only.

[11] *Passion of Remembrance*.