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Abstract:

Who gets permission to tell their story through the broadcast and podcast industries and how those stories are told has been my central concern for the last thirty years. Speech radio is defined by the voices we hear on air, and I have a particular interest in documenting voices and experiences from the African diaspora and other under-represented groups. I was born and brought up in Leeds, the youngest child of parents from the Caribbean, and two demographic descriptors, race and class, go some way to shaping me as an individual, as well as defining my professional course in the audio industry.

Audio documentary-making is shaped by the stories that people tell and inflected by their socio-economic backgrounds. What I have come to understand from my experience as a producer of radio documentaries, is that behind the myriad encounters and negotiations that take place when constructing a documentary, there is often an elusive possibility to create space for those whose experiences have so often been marginalised or silenced. In this dissertation, I am revisiting a selection of my productions. Most, but not all of them, are documentaries where the people involved are from under-represented groups as far as mainstream media like the BBC or NPR is concerned. I will show how they and their stories made it to being broadcast. A core aim of this thesis is to consider how I brought some of those voices and experiences to air, by various acts of listening: listening to what is being said to me as a producer and reporter; listening to what is not being said; listening to the archives; and listening out for the gaps and silences in what is being preserved.

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Introduction

In 1995, I remember sitting in my office at the BBC late one evening and my desk phone rang and on the line was a voice I didn't recognise. She asked for me and once I'd said: "Speaking," she said, "This is Dr Betty Shabazz". I immediately sat up straight; she had that kind of voice. My faxed invitation to her some week or so earlier had clearly got through. I was asked to spell out again the nature of the series I was inviting her to take part in. Dr Shabazz politely declined. I was inviting her to reflect on her husband's assassination in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem on February 21, 1965. Dr Shabazz explained that the subject was "still too raw". She said that next time I'm in New York we should meet and there might be other projects she would be interested in discussing. A few weeks after our telephone conversation, I was sitting in an executive meeting room at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn with Dr Shabazz chatting about future projects. It was hard not to pinch myself. I was having a conversation with the widow of Malcolm X, with the woman who tragically found herself crouched by his side moments after he was gunned down at point blank. A project that Dr Shabazz was curious to know if I would be interested in involved her telling me about the invitations she receives to talk to college students. Dr Shabazz referred to a talk she had recently given at Harvard University. The new students, clearly as excited to meet Dr Shabazz as I was, were sitting in a large, raked lecture theatre. Dr Shabazz said she liked to open with a quote, such as this that addressed American hypocrisy and racism towards its African American population:

There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay

your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival. (Douglass, 1852)

Dr Shabazz would then ask her young audience: “Who said that?” and without missing a beat the students responded: “Malcolm!”. “No”, said Dr Betty, “that was Frederick Douglass!”

Her talk to the students would then proceed to emphasise that the African American experience of speaking truth to power, of being on the receiving end of poor treatment from politicians, law makers and educators goes back many years and with Malcolm, there were others, like Douglass, who had said pretty much the same as him a hundred years earlier. Dr Shabazz was interested in getting involved in a documentary on Douglass at some point in the future, but for now the idea of going over the details of her husband’s assassination was not going to happen.

For me, many of these invitations and enquiries were far more than speaking requests for a radio show. The subject matter was both personal and public and my aim was to open a space for interviewees to feel it was a safe space and their space; it was to invite them to have a seat at the table, a table of their choice. Journalistically my role was to be an engaged listener, asking for clarification on behalf of the audience where I felt it was needed and challenge, again where required. My experience of making radio programmes and podcasts, in the United States, in the UK, Africa, Europe and the Caribbean about the African diaspora, about the working class, about a diverse range of people and communities often brought me face to face with people who were rarely invited to tell their stories. As the youngest son of Caribbean parents, born in Leeds and brought up on working class housing estates I was already familiar with the challenges of being heard. The audio work that I am introducing to the reader is a

series of interventions that each in turn go beyond the experiences of somebody who went to university and ended up on a BBC training course. I am sure that it was expected that all the radio production trainees would bring large portions of themselves, their interests and passions to the table. Yet, the audio pieces I have selected draw connective lines between the different themes and people I was interviewing and by extension, the different forms of listening I would have to employ to suit the narratives I was shaping.

This thesis, like my career in radio and podcasting, is in essence about listening, giving people the platform to be heard and about the power that underpins all those interactions and often informs the basis of the conversations. Sometimes I held the power, because of the name of the organisation I was working for: BBC Radio 4; BBC World Service; or New York Public Radio. At other times, it was simply because I was holding the microphone. Most of the time, as the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot observed in his book *Silencing the Past*, “the ultimate mark of power may be invisibility, the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.” (Trouillot, 2015: xxiii) What I aim to achieve in these pages is offer some insight into the roots of power, in listening and in the creation of audio narratives.

Alongside millions of other people on May 25, 2020, I watched George Floyd’s life ebbing away under a police officer’s knee for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Protests and demonstrations reverberated around the US and in other towns and cities around the world. Many businesses, institutions, and individuals took this as a moment for reflection on their own practices and attitudes towards race. The Black Lives Matter movement made their presence felt again. I also took the cue to reflect on my own work and practices.

On June 7, 2020, the demonstrations reached Bristol, led by the Black Lives Matter movement. Television cameras and scores of smartphones were on hand when a few demonstrators hooked a length of rope around the neck of the imposing nineteenth century statue of slave-trader Edward Colston and pulled it off its plinth and down to the ground. After being toppled, Colston's statue was defaced, covered in graffiti, and was finally dispatched to the watery depths of Bristol harbour. This was a moment of huge national and international significance. The reverberations are still being felt today.

The next day another viral posting appeared, this time in the form of a poem, entitled *Hollow* written and presented by the Bristol-based poet Vanessa Kisuule. When this Victorian statue was ripped from its pedestal and its true composition laid bare, this is how Kisuule described the felled icon:

*Countless times I passed that plinth,
Its heavy threat of metal and marble.
But as you landed, a piece of you fell off, broke away,
And inside, nothing but air.
This whole time, you were hollow. (Kisuule, 2020)*

The inner workings of this literally monumentally powerful figure who had made himself and the city of Bristol wealthy on the backs of enslaved Africans were exposed. In the days that followed, I was reminded of Trouillot's observation about power. Exposing the roots and the hollow reality of Colston the statue and, for Kisuule, Colston the man, whose wealth and status in Bristol was contingent on his dehumanising business of chattel slavery in the West Indies, gave pause for thought.

My mind turned to my profession and my own work in audio. A seminal moment occurred just a matter of weeks after joining the BBC in 1989 as a trainee producer. I would take any opportunity to escape to the lowest depths of Broadcasting House where the BBC archives were stored. I would revel in the sheer weight of history that was recorded by the BBC, much of which was recorded in the very building where I sat. In truth, I was as interested in what wasn't there as much as what was. There was one search I remember making: what does the BBC have on Rosa Parks? Of all the figures from twentieth century United States history, the actions of this one individual had a profound impact globally and permanently shifted the course of American history. As I turned the microfiche wheel, my search revealed only a few short news clips and summaries of December 1, 1955, the date of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Surely there must be something more than two-minute clips, one-minute news items; even I was looking for the long half an hour interview. *Desert Island Discs*? Surely Roy Plumley invited her to select her favourite discs? *Woman's Hour*? Television? I couldn't find anything substantial. This is when I made a vow to myself to seek out stories and voices that remain silenced, muted, untroubled in many ways by producers and executives for whom these stories were not a priority; I would attempt to make programmes that gave a platform for those voices. Producing a long interview with Rosa Parks and securing its place in the BBC Archives was now on my list. On December 1st, 1955, Parks wasn't just tired; she was exhausted by the indignity of having to vacate a seat designated for "colored" passengers for white people to sit down. Her civil disobedience was peaceful, and peace is written into the BBC motto: etched in Portland stone on the west side of Broadcasting House: "Nation shall speak peace unto nation". Surely there should be a larger place for Rosa Parks in the BBC Archives.

In January 2001 the Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke, might have been referring to the BBC Archives too when he made headlines with a statement about the BBC describing it as “hideously white”. He could also have added male and middle class. Nevertheless, I already knew that, and so did many of my colleagues. When I arrived in Magazine Programmes as a producer in 1991, following my two years as a trainee, it was quite clear to me that the handful of black and brown producers was not going to be sufficient to shift the cultural and editorial dial. When Dyke made his statement, he was rightly challenged by the most publicly recognisable black BBC TV news presenter, George Alagiah. Alagiah recognised that while the Director General's observation was true, "Many journalists will be saying that it is no longer good enough to identify a problem if he can't come up with solutions," (Wells, 2001)

What were the solutions? In radio terms the structures remained intact. A few schemes were launched aimed at bringing in small numbers of black and brown trainees into radio. *Magazine Programmes* was a huge department and was home to many of the flagship programmes for Radio 4: *Start the Week*, *Woman's Hour*, *You and Yours*, *Feedback*, *Desert Island Discs*, *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*, *All in the Mind* - all of which are programmes I have worked on. It was clear to me that in my own department, change was going to be slow when it comes to personnel and diversity - painfully slow. In Jo Pierson and Joke Bauwens' *Digital Broadcasting: An Introduction to New Media* (2015) they offer some perceptive insights into what happens with cultural change in broadcasting.

Although Pierson and Bauwens' focus is largely on the transition from traditional TV production and distribution, it applies very effectively to the changes in the audio industry when they speak of “how the transition from traditional to digital broadcasting is not only

reconfiguring but sometimes also reproducing established arrangements of regulation and policy, industries and economies, content and audience practices.” (Pierson and Bauwens, 2015, p1). Under BBC Director General John Birt, in the mid-1990s, the organisation underwent a corporation-wide transition from traditional to digital broadcasting. However, culturally the organisation struggled to retain black and brown members of staff or hire black and brown people in senior roles in significant numbers: these failures of representation continue today. When George Aligiah challenged Dyke’s “hideously white” comment he was referring to this reproduction of ‘established arrangements’ (Wells, 2001).

I had already decided that my main plan was to make my own contributions to the archives by producing content that showcased the experiences and voices of the African diaspora, of the working class, of the North of England, of those whose voices are not widely or deeply represented. Listening to hidden voices and creating content where they could be heard was a mode of operating for me throughout my career and continues to this day.

In 2010, I was invited by John Biewen to participate in an audio conference at Duke University where the voice was a recurring theme of discussion. In the most recent edition of his book of essays by radio makers *Reality Radio*, Biewen asks a question in his introduction: “Why are so many people – particularly young people - choosing to listen to audio docs? After all this is supposed to be the age of the visual, video was supposed have killed the radio star. It goes back to human desire for the human voice.” (Biewen 2017, 2). As far as I could recall, I don’t remember there being any other black or brown delegates at the three-day conference. For me, the human voice and oral traditions in audio documentary-making take on historical, political and deeply personal dimensions, rooted in slavery, exploitation and immigration. Following

the oral traditions of Africa, in the experiences of millions of Africans in the diaspora the human voice is all we had once the European traders had taken a decision to deny us language, religion or history. The human voice and memory remained and listening to and sharing our stories was and continues as a means of survival, a means of escaping to freedom, a means of transcending the horrors of the enslavement and its repercussions and a means of making sense of the world. John Biewen quite rightly points out that those early podcast stars, such as Jad Abumrad at *Radiolab*, Ira Glass at *This American Life*, started out as hosts of public radio shows, and public radio in the US was, like the BBC in the UK, a predominantly white space.

By spooling back through aspects of my publications – audio-documentaries - the objective of this research project is to reveal the professional and personal narrative thread that accounts for my dedication to listening to the voices of the forgotten and the powerless, and accounts for how this producer and commissioning editor would alight upon the idea of *The Listening Project*. I will discuss some of the technical and practical skills I was taught as a trainee and as a young producer; some I adopt, some I adapt to suit my needs, others I just reject. I explore them all in reference to areas of my own work as a programme maker. This dissertation is not autobiographical, although there is at times an inextricable link between the work and the person behind it.

In the first chapter my focus is on “The Art of Listening”, a continuing theme throughout my work, providing people with the space to be themselves and to be heard. These people are often the unknown, the voices of the diaspora, the ignored and the silenced. In “Finding a Voice”, I concentrate on Frederick Douglass, a towering figure of the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century United States and in Britain. Through Douglass I address the centrality of the voice in this extraordinary person’s life. In chapter 3, “Listening to the African Diaspora”,

I address the challenges of coming face to face with uncomfortable historical truths, through my documentary *The Belly of the Beast* (1996) where I accompany a young black Liverpudlian to Ghana to confront contested narratives on slavery and history and the roles in the trade played by Africans. As an extension to this theme, I cross the Atlantic in the documentary *Separate but Equal* (2004) to listen to an elderly white southern man reflect on the virulent racism of his grandfather and the part he played in resisting the desegregation of public schools in the United States. The fourth chapter concentrates on preparing for the unexpected which lies at the heart of a recording with Rosa Parks, where the civil rights activist revealed a little-known aspect of her now famous seat-on-the-bus act of civil disobedience. In *Handsworth Revolution* (1992), my first full-length radio documentary, the unexpected also appears when a key interviewee shared sensitive and intimate details about both his parents' working lives in the sex industry. So much meaning and understanding happens in the silences and pauses and so in chapter 5, "Sound and Invisibility" I reflect on the gaping silence between myself and one of Malcolm X's daughters which in the end proved to be the emotional and intellectual turning point in the story. In chapter 6 "Voice as Everything" I discuss my Radio 3 documentary on the American writer James Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues* (2004). What started out as an editorial and technical exercise to make a long documentary celebrating a life shaped out of many hours of archive material, turned out to be what I considered a tribute to a writer who had devoted his life to telling his own story and indirectly the story of many others of us Africans of the diaspora. In chapter 7, "Secrets and Success", I revisit the documentary I pitched to secure a place as a BBC trainee producer, an examination of West Indian migration to the United States. This chapter centres on challenging and overturning received historical wisdom by providing the platform for those who lived through key events, in this case migration to the UK, to speak and be heard. The final chapter "Platform Change" considers the impact of podcasting on my own career and those of others and on the audio profession.

One thing above everything that unifies the selection of work I will be discussing and reflecting on is listening. Across all the work I'm going to be revisiting in this paper, my main purpose was to create the space for my many and varied interviewees to be heard. I took the view that audiences deserved to be heard, as do interviewees, whether they are considered experts or not. This position was perhaps best articulated in the following way by Bertolt Brecht:

The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers. Any attempt by the radio to give a truly public character to public occasions is a step in the right direction. (Brecht, 1926)

Brecht's critique of radio in the early 1920s was for me so far ahead of its time. How to let unlikely voices speak and be heard I believe underpins all the work I will be reflecting on. Brecht also offered the best description of what the *Listening Project* was to become, but ninety years earlier.

Chapter 1: The Act of Listening

On Friday 30 March 2012, just before the *World at One*, BBC Radio 4 audiences found themselves listening in to a new programme that had arrived on their schedule. It was a conversation between a grandfather and his granddaughter. Their voices echoed a large part of my upbringing: he, an ex-miner from Pontefract, the site of the largest colliery in England and she, his granddaughter, the first in their family to go to university. I was born less than twenty miles from this part of West Yorkshire. I know those accents and ways of speaking; I know that some people from that corner of Yorkshire will often switch the preposition “of” for “on”. But I didn’t know those communities from the inside. I didn’t know really know “them”.

The Listening Project launch edition showcased a conversation between former coal miner John Picken, nicknamed ‘Chick’, and his granddaughter, Lindsay. I sat quietly at my desk, in open-plan Radio 4 management space in Broadcasting House and listened to their distinctive voices and perspectives on life reverberate off the original wood-panelling. Lord Reith’s own distinctive voice had bounced off the same panelling, because where I sat, with Radio Four’s management team, was once part of the BBC’s first Director General’s office. I allowed myself a few minutes of pride, and a smile, as the person who conceived and commissioned the project for the BBC and as a lad from Yorkshire via the Caribbean who in a small way broke the rules and let real people in to tell their stories, to each other without being prodded or nudged by the conventions and mores of broadcasters. The smile was a small and personal sense of attachment to Chick and Lindsey’s story as historically generations of my Caribbean family pulled

sugarcane from the earth, which would have sweetened the tea of generations of Yorkshire miners, thirsty after hauling tons of coal from beneath the earth's surface

It was the opportunity “to hear pearls of wisdom” being broadcast from the voices and experiences of regular people, as opposed to the armies of respected and experienced experts, expert broadcasters, academics, commentators, and the like, that excited me. I first read about a New York-based project called StoryCorps in 2003 (Getlin, 2003). I began contemplating how I could develop an idea like that at the BBC.

The *LA Times* article described the launch of the *StoryCorps* booth on the concourse of Grand Central Terminal in New York City. In this quintessentially busy location two people would be invited to put a pause in their lives to have what they described as “a conversation of a lifetime”. This was not about celebrity or fame, nor was it the constructed confrontation between two people who politically or morally are at odds with each other. These were people who knew each other well, friends, family. In 2007 in his anthology of some of the best stories from *StoryCorps*, its creator and author David Isay, succinctly summed up the purpose of the project, which in turn became the guiding principles for *The Listening Project*: “*StoryCorps* is a project about permanence in an ever-disposable society. It reminds us of what's really important in the midst of all of life's distractions. It encourages us to connect despite endless temptations to detach and disengage”. (Isay 2007, 4). For me it was clear that the key to that much-needed human connection was listening.

Chapter 2: Finding A Voice

“Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free.” Frederick Douglass, *Blessings of Liberty and Education*, 1894 (Buccola, 2012, 153)

In 1989 I went from undergraduate at the University of East Anglia (UEA) to the BBC. The main reason for applying to study American History and American Literature at UEA had been the allure of a two-term course on the African American experience – covering history, culture and literature. I grew up in Leeds, the child of Caribbean migrants from the small Eastern Caribbean island Nation of St Kitts and Nevis, my cultural reference points tended to be wide and varied: Leeds United for club football; Brazil for International football; Stan Barstow and Barry Hines would sit alongside James Baldwin and Toni Morrison; and if I were ever cast away to the BBC’s Desert Island the discs I’d take would most likely range from Marc Bolan, Stevie Wonder, Abdullah Ibrahim to Linton Kwesi Johnson. But the autumn and spring terms course led by Professor Chris Bigsby in many ways offered an opportunity to take a deep dive into the world that has in many ways spoken loudest to me culturally and psychologically – the African American experience.

Frederick Douglass was one of the most powerful voices and writers I came across on the course. Douglass’ life was dedicated to telling his own story in ways and words that he felt comfortable with. Literacy and the determination to define oneself and one’s destiny was central to Douglass’ life; his three autobiographies depict his long life from slavery through to his escape and his life as a celebrated abolitionist, orator, writer and statesman.

Douglass learned to understand at a young age, perhaps around the age of nine, that there was a link between literacy and freedom. In secrecy, his mistress taught him basic literacy skills; an awareness grew from Douglass' literacy that pointed the way from slavery to freedom. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* he captured that moment of awareness:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr and Mrs Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B C. After I learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs Auld from instructing me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. (Douglass 2012, 20)

What Douglass understood at that tender age was, in his own words, “the pathway from slavery to freedom” – and that pathway was constructed in language and the ability to spell out your own story literally and figuratively. Without the skill of self-definition, one would forever remain the silent property of others. Through Douglass and other audio stories I was determined professionally and personally not to silence the experiences of the African diaspora; in cultural and historical terms these were my stories too. Tina Campt's revelatory study *Listening to Images* struck a chord with me as she describes giving voice to photographic images of the African diaspora in Europe, the Caribbean and North America: “...it is through sound that I seek a deeper engagement with the forgotten histories and suppressed forms of diasporic memory that these images transmit” (Campt 2017, 6). It seems I have been long walking a similar path to Campt but aiming to create enduring images from sound for the listeners, rather than sound from images for viewers.

Invisibility was also to be challenged and this perhaps explains why Douglass gained or perhaps actively sought the mantle of the most photographed American in the nineteenth

century. Douglass himself was fully aware of the power of the photographic image in self-definition. Being free to define oneself through your own experience was Douglass' life's work (Bernier, Stauffer, and Todd 2018). It was also the framework for successive generations of African American writers and thinkers: the autobiography; not merely a literary device but for many an existential imperative.

I turned my attention to Douglass at the BBC around 1993. I had already scoped out the BBC archives to discover no references to Douglass at all. Nothing. I can't recall seeing anything listed – TV or radio. The early 1990s was a time of change and for many it was turmoil at the BBC. The new Director General John Birt was hastening change – his central aim was to shift the BBC from the technological backwaters of analogue to be an industry digital leader. To bring about this digital revolution Birt was wise to impose that change via an organisation-wide structural change. One of the central planks of his reformation was the separation of broadcast and commissioning. When I joined the BBC as a Radio 4 trainee in 1989, the Network Controller was Michael Green. To pitch an idea at the network was in effect to pitch an idea directly to Green himself. In 1993 Birt had rolled out Producer Choice across the BBC – a kind of internal market where departments had a choice of buying services in-house or venturing out into the competitive independent market. One consequence of producer choice for contract producers like me was that Birt now made it possible for producers to pitch for work right across the organisation; no longer was I to be limited to the label “Radio 4 producer” I was now a “BBC Radio Producer”. So, in 1994 I pitched Radio 3 the idea of a Sunday feature on Douglass. It was the very first feature my Magazine Programmes Unit successfully pitched to Radio 3.

The Douglass pitch to Radio 3's Head of Speech, Brian Barfield, had to convince him and therefore the potential listening audience that Douglass' life is a story worth listening to. A convenient anniversary was approaching, the hundredth year since his death in 1895. I knew that I needed to make listeners care deeply about this man, and so I focussed on his oratory, his time in Britain and Ireland where he secured his freedom and his own emphasis on literacy as the route from slavery to freedom. There was one more theme that dominated and that was Douglass' life-long determination to tell his own story, in his own words and for audiences of all kinds to hear his voice.

The opening section of the documentary reflects how Douglass opens the first of his three autobiographies, with three words: "I was born...." Even though Douglass was born in the United States, I chose to begin his story in an imagined "freedom" on the African continent and not as an enslaved African on North American soil. "I was born" becomes an ancestral cry, reversing time and space and replanting Douglass and indeed all of us in the diaspora back on African soil. I was in search of some music that was as authentic to West Africa and to the times that predated European interest in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Ideally this music would have been recorded on location, perhaps Ghana or Nigeria. I had worked once with a BBC presenter and academic musicologist specialising in African music, Professor Lucy Duran. She was very happy to donate a recording – a very well recorded digital tape of what sounds like a community of men, women and children singing the praises of Allah – mixing Arabic and a local African language, against a beat being hammered out with what sounds like iron. The recording of "I was born" I had made of the actor reading Douglass' words was split up and interspersed across the section. The next sound was water, perhaps the Bay of Guinea, deep water, lapping:

“I was born”

The sounds of creaking ropes and wooden planks were next: “I was born”

The cracking of whips and chains: “I was....”

The sorrowful song of Africans working under the whip: “I”

Whip: “I....”

Whip: “I...”

And finally, Douglass’ own voice and words emerging from the sale of humans in Africa, the torment of the middle passage, the violent denial of one’s own language, faith, name, family... until we reach this astonishing assertion of existence, against all odds, the opening section of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. (Douglass 1994, 15).

Douglass set out to tell his story to condemn the institution of slavery into which he and millions of Africans in the diaspora were born. I wanted to root my documentary in a time and place that predated the trans-Atlantic slave trade; Douglass and my own ancestors were definitely born into slavery, but we were not born as slaves.

I remember being disappointed in myself for not having the courage to use my own voice in the programme to make the introductory remarks and to name-check the speakers. The weight of the organisation was still bearing down on me to such an extent that I didn't think it was right that I did that. I saw my role as behind the scenes. I remember asking the studio manager, who had a little experience as an announcer, if he would go in and voice up the names. He leapt at the opportunity. That aside, the programme was received well; featured on Radio 4's *Pick of the Week* and a few positive newspaper reviews. Our head of department Graham Ellis had announced in a departmental meeting a year earlier that "there's a bottle of champagne waiting for the first producer to get a Radio 3 *Sunday Feature* commission. I plucked up the courage to stop Graham Ellis on the corridor near my office to ask him if the documentary could be entered for a SONY award, the most prestigious UK award for audio production. He said the competition was very strong this year, so that was unlikely. Some months later on the same corridor Ellis this time stopped me to heap praise on my Douglass documentary. He insisted that it should be entered for the SONY Awards and I should be very proud. I was pleased but only momentarily. I asked him when he heard the show. He told me just a few days ago, at the weekend on Radio 3. I explained that he'd listened to the repeat version; the original was broadcast some months ago, in the previous year, and so the documentary was no longer eligible for entry. I am still waiting for the champagne.

Chapter 3: Listening to the African Diaspora

Before 1996, the controller of Radio 4 was Michael Green and in BBC Radio terms commissioning editors had yet to be invented. If you had an idea, you find a way to get a memo written and sent to the controller for his consideration. On the other hand, Michael Green was fond of the term: “my door is always open”. I believed this was a genuine invitation to knock, enter and pitch; so, one day in 1995 I did just that.

Michael Green’s office was in fact open, just a few inches ajar. I pushed it further open, put my head around the door and saw Michael sitting at his desk, piles of documents and newspapers on his desk. I remember the warm welcome, “Come in Tony, what can I do for you?”- I made my way across his thick green carpet towards his desk. I felt that he was already listening, and he genuinely wanted to hear what I had to say. I sat down and he gestured for me to begin.

In my hand I held an article torn out of the *Financial Times*. It was a piece about Ghana, turning its coastal slave fortresses into tourist destinations, mainly for people from the African diaspora. I had a deep desire to visit one of the slave forts and record that experience as part of a documentary. “Interesting” said Michael Green. “Who would you take as presenter?”

“I don’t know yet”

As it stood, this was not that much of a pitch, but I think he had a sense that my passion for the journey and the encounter with slavery and the continent would be enough to form the basis of a strong story. I recall his verdict on my pitch almost word for word:

“Tony, I have no idea how you are going to make this but enjoy doing it.”

It is worth noting that I was not some first-timer who had walked in off the street never having produced a documentary for national radio before. I had made a handful of documentaries at this point. But I came away with a distinct impression that I was being heard and trusted.

The article I had saved from the *Financial Times* (FT) included an interview with Charles Adu-Arhin, a Ghanaian tourist guide at Elmina Castle. Elmina was a slave fortress built in 1482 by the Portuguese but taken over from 1637 by the Dutch. What struck me hard in the article was that Charles made a point of explaining to the FT journalist that on every tour he points out the plaque on the wall where the present-day tribal chiefs of Ghana have apologised for the part in the slave trade that their ancestors played; as with every kind of trade, if the Europeans were the buyers, the Africans were the sellers. I wanted this reality of history to be faced in my documentary, as awkward and uncomfortable as that might be. A few years before my pitch in 1993 my brother Caryl Phillips, in his novel, *Crossing the River*, addressed this dark crime against humanity:

A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths, until we reached the place where the mud flats are populated with crabs and gulls. *Returned across the bar with the yawl, and I prayed a while in the factory chapel.* I watched as they huddled together and stared up at the fort, above which flew a foreign flag. (Phillips 1994, 1).

At my office in London, I found a telephone number for Charles; it was a number for Elmina Castle. I explained who I was and who I worked for and that I was planning to travel to Ghana within weeks and asked if I could interview him and record a tour. Finding a presenter was my biggest challenge. My editor and head of department suggested names of black politicians like Paul Boateng, Diana Abbot or Bernie Grant. I knew that I wanted to travel with somebody who had a genuine passion for the subject of slavery and an eagerness to visit Africa, ideally for the same time. On a personal trip to Liverpool the right person was about to emerge.

In a Liverpool bookshop, I stumbled over a young black man reading a book on the floor. He stood up, we apologised to each other and immediately started enquiring after each other's lives. "What's Radio 4?" was my favourite question from the young man, Laurence. We continued talking for a good hour or so about slavery and Africa; he pretty much exploded with enthusiasm for the subject, fizzing with information about Liverpool and its links to the trade in Africa, the streets named after slave traders like Great Newton Street, Gladstone Road, Tarleton Street; the buildings like the Cunard building, with stone-carved symbols of Africa and slavery: "If you're going to tell a story about slavery in Ghana, you have to start here in Liverpool, cos Liverpool was the belly of the beast".

Over the course of an hour, I had a title, *The Belly of the Beast*, and a brand new 20-year-old presenter: Laurence Westgaph.

On location I wanted Laurence to exude his enthusiasm and excitement about travelling to Africa for the first time; and that he did. "I can't believe I'm here, Africa, the

motherland....” And at the right time, in real time, I wanted him to confront this other layer of complexity about the slave trade.

We had a night in Accra before being driven along the coast to Elmina. The castle loomed large and completely overshadowed the small fishing village that is Elmina. I knew that our tour guide Charles was expecting us. I wasn’t sure how Laurence was going to respond to Charles’ “apology from the tribal chiefs” but I was determined to explore this as a possible moment of reckoning, historically and psychologically.

We assembled just outside the castle early one morning with Charles, the guide, along with half a dozen other tourists, all African Americans from US cities including Chicago and Atlanta. I made it known who I was and that I would be recording the tour and that might include their questions and reactions. There were two significant moments on the tour with distinctly different responses. The “door of no return” provoked audible sadness and anger. This ‘door’ was a narrow space leading from the castle’s dungeons where imprisoned Africans would be held for weeks, sometimes months awaiting the next slave ship owner to arrive, trade with the Africans and then set off for what became known as ‘the middle passage’ – the passage of human cargo en route to a lifetime of enslavement, terror and oppression. The two other ‘passages’ formed the other parts of this triangular trade – the first where the ships leave European ports, like Liverpool, laden with goods to trade for humans like guns, bullets, iron; the final passage was the return from the Caribbean and America to Europe with sugar, cotton, tobacco. After coming face to face with the “door” and its one-way route down to the water and to the awaiting ships, an African American woman told us that she “would never be able to look at white people in the same way again.” Without doubt this is a deeply moving and bitter reminder of a past that centuries of enslavement had effectively stolen from millions of

Africans – the diaspora. So, to come face to face with it generations later is psychologically and spiritually painful.

The other significant moment pretty much just went by in silence: Charles pointed upwards to a plaque high on a wall and explained that the tribal chiefs had apologised for their part in the trade. For Laurence and the other tourists, it was as if Charles hadn't spoken. His audience stood about him sipping water and wafting away the odd fly. Gripping a microphone in one hand and the recorder in the other, I asked Charles to repeat what he'd said and with my eyes and neck gestured to Laurence to listen and respond this time. Charles agreed to go again. Still no response from Atlanta or Chicago, but Laurence asked for clarity. "Trade is a two-way process: the Europeans were the buyers, and the Africans were they sellers?"

Laurence fell silent for the rest of the tour, and for the rest of the evening too. The following morning, I knew he was emerging from the shellshock of processing that complicating factor in the slave trade.

The following morning, we had just sat down to order breakfast out in the open at our guest house cafe, a small place called Mabel's Table, when Laurence asked: "You know what I'd really love now?" I was expecting the answer to be an early flight home. "A bowl of *Fruit and Fibre*, I don't even really like it but...." He was back.

Ten years after the trip to Ghana with Laurence I was the series producer of the prestigious BBC Reith Lectures. The guest in 2006 was the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim. His

first lecture was an evocation of his firm belief that politics and society could benefit from a deeper understanding of music. Together Barenboim and writer and academic Edward Said in 1999 founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, made up of young players of Israeli and Arab backgrounds. For Barenboim, their Orchestra, any orchestra, was an experiment in listening; to successfully produce the music, each player must listen to the narrative of the next player. And in the case of the West Eastern Divan Orchestra, the next player might be perceived as an enemy:

And therefore, in our Utopian republic, as I like to think of it, as the West-Eastern Divan, we have learned and we give everybody the opportunity to express himself, herself, to the enemy, and also to hear the version of the enemy, to listen and to hear it. And therefore, not necessarily to agree with it, but to understand the other narrative... (BBC Reith Lectures 2006, Lecture 1)

The central thesis of this and indeed all the lectures was the need to listen to the narrative of the other, and in some cases what one might perceive as your enemy. The purpose of *The Belly of the Beast* was to have Laurence, and myself, confront the triangular connections that the trans-Atlantic slave trade had mapped onto our identities as children of the diaspora: African, Caribbean, and European. And as Barenboim saw in music, nothing in the diaspora experience is independent.

Confronting difficult truths is something I wanted to explore further in documentary form. Once again, the aim was to create the space for people to feel that they step into and safely share thoughts or experiences that are sensitive or sometimes volatile. United States social and political history throughout the twentieth century is sealed in the impermeable

vener of racial division. The democratic structures and systems constructed in North America from 1619 onwards and throughout the Caribbean region were tainted by the foundations that were steeped in the moral double-standards of white supremacy. The journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones stepped into this space in 2019 with her 1619 Project for the *New York Times*. She divided historical opinions as she set out to situate slavery and the arrival of the first enslaved African on American soil at the heart of the American narrative. In an interview for *The Atlantic* magazine (2019) she reflected on the impact of her journalism on readers: “I know when I talk to people, they have said that they feel like they are understanding the architecture of their country in a way that they had not.” (Serwer 2019).

All the fault lines in race and racism in the United States lead one back inevitably to places like Elmina and to the many millions who were squeezed through the narrow doors of no return in the hundreds of trading fortresses that lined the West African coastline, buying and selling Africans. One of those fault lines in the United States that I wanted to address in 2004 was the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown vs Board of Education* landmark case that desegregated public schools. I decided to look in detail at one of the five test cases that the NAACP under the legal leadership of Thurgood Marshall brought to the US Supreme Court to challenge the legal doctrine of ‘separate but equal’. In my BBC Radio 4 documentary entitled *Separate but Equal* (2004) I travelled to Somerton, a small town in South Carolina, where in 1947 Joe Elliot, the Chair of the Board of Education denied black and white citizens equal access to educational facilities, by denying black children school buses. As a result, many African American children without access to a car or bus had a nine mile walk to school and nine miles back home. Here’s how Joe Elliot responded to the request to the Board of Education for equal transportation: “We ain’t got no buses for your nigger children”.

For millions of Africans, the lived history of navigating the indignities of European and American racism began in the holding dungeons of the many castles like Elmina along the West African coast and became all too real when that first step was taken across the threshold of the door of no return.

Chapter 4: A Seat at the Table: Meeting Rosa Parks

Producing a documentary about Frederick Douglass led me to reflect on my undergraduate history courses. I decided to pitch a six-part series to Radio 4 called “The Spirit of America” (1996) exploring significant moments of American history but explored through the perspective of key African American historians, politicians or activists. This was to be an American history series, but American history seen through African American eyes and experiences. I wanted to invite the African American experience and perspective to the table, to discuss and dissect major moments in the nation’s political and cultural history. The times I spent as a trainee in the BBC Archives were now going to pay off. The idea of interviewing Rosa Parks and offering her the opportunity to tell the story, her story, of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the catalyst. Many other historians and commentators have had their day commenting on the Bus Boycott and other key facets of the Civil Rights Movement; now this was Rosa Parks’ seat, and it was her table. I wanted Rosa Parks to tell the story herself, what she remembers, how she felt, what we don’t know; after all, as Julius Lester reminded us, she “wore the shoe.” (Lester 1969, 1). The five other moments I selected were: the Emancipation Proclamation 1863 with historian John Hope Franklin; the Wall Street Crash and the Depression years with the Commerce Secretary under President Clinton, Ron Brown; the Harlem Renaissance with David Levering Lewis; the McCarthy Era with Paul Robeson Jr, and the Rodney King beating and LA riots with Johnnie Cochran.

Consideration for who gets a seat at the table in audio storytelling has always been a touchstone in how I like to produce content. Very early in my career this was best articulated when I was introduced to an American radio documentary entitled *Ghetto Life 101* (1993), produced by

David Isay. The story followed the lives of two twelve-year-old African American boys from the South Side of Chicago, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman. Isay, an experienced radio producer, made a significant decision: as a white male producer he decided to collaborate with LeAlan and Lloyd and have them record their own stories, removing himself from the role of on-the-ground reporter and producer. He was aware that his own presence as an “outsider” on the predominantly African American South Side of Chicago would have had an impact on what people reveal and how they articulate their stories. It strikes me that Isay’s approach to exploring the African American experience in late twentieth century Chicago was very much in tune with the position historian John Blassingame took when examining slave testimonies of the nineteenth century United States: both are acutely aware of the central role that power plays in the interview. Blassingame, who dedicated most of his academic life to slave narratives distilled the challenge in the following way in his book, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*:

Since the antebellum narratives were frequently dictated to and written by whites, any study of such sources must begin with an assessment of the editors. An editor’s education, religious beliefs, literary skill, attitudes toward slavery and occupation all affected how he recorded that account of the slave’s life. Blassingame 1977, xviii)

In search of an authentic reflection of the lives of his two young reporters, Isay avoided the trap of having Lloyd or LeAlan dictate their narratives to him. With Lloyd and LeAlan holding the microphones, they were able to illicit responses from friends and family that perhaps would not have materialised had Isay been the one with the microphone.

By offering his young collaborators a seat at the table, Isay enabled the story to be told from their perspective; this is what I wanted to achieve with Rosa Parks. I wanted to hear how she remembered that historic day on December 1st, 1955, when she refused to give up her seat for

a white passenger on a Montgomery bus. We decided to frame questions that would allow Ms Parks the chance to set the context to the day itself, rather than assume that we knew exactly what happened and forge ahead to the “what happened next?” scenarios.

Here’s how we framed it:

Caryl Phillips: You’ve become much respected, much admired around the world because of what happened on December 1, 1955. Had you had any trouble, conflict... erm... with the buses before that date?

Our intention was to open a door for our esteemed interviewee to tell us more about her background leading up to that day in 1955. Somehow the narrative that she was a “tired old seamstress” at the end of a long day appears to have emerged as the “truth” about what happened on that day. She was no more tired than any other day; she was in fact a seamstress, but she was not old; she was forty-two years old. It would have been very easy to frame a question about what happened next, once Ms Parks refused to give up her seat and talk about what happened at the police station, or the courthouse. But we had fortuitously created the space for Rosa Parks to talk about something that perhaps she wasn’t planning to talk about ahead of our meeting. Here’s where she took the story:

Rosa Parks: Yes I had, the same driver who had me arrested, evicted me from the bus in 1943, because when I boarded the bus and found a place to stand in the back, he told me to go round to the backdoor to get in the busand I told him I was already on the bus and didn’t see the necessity of getting off and then trying to get back in at the back door...and of course the back door was very crowded with people standing in it, in the step well...and then he told me not to ride his bus if I couldn’t go in the back to get in... And he evicted me from the bus. He didn’t call the police. He just had me to leave the bus.

Caryl Phillips: This was 1943 had you ridden his bus consciously or unconsciously between '43 and '55 was there a feud between the two of you?

Rosa Parks: Well, there wasn't a feud ...I just didn't ride the bus that he drove (for) a long time.

The Rosa Parks episode of *Spirit of America* opened new and rarely heard insights into what are considered familiar historical events, by creating space for the person, in this case a civil rights icon, to take a seat at the table. My very first documentary in 1992 called *Handsworth Revolution* was in many ways the inverse of the Rosa Parks experience; sometimes while telling a story, unexpected seats at surprising tables appear.

I had heard that in Birmingham a growing number of young black men and women, many were teenagers, were converting to Islam and I was curious to find out more. I had recently completed my two-year traineeship at the BBC and was keen to propose and produce my own documentaries, and so I set off to Birmingham for several weekends to see if I could locate some of these spiritual seekers. There was no newspaper article, no report or academic paper as a guide. I knew that what I must do is find some young Muslim converts on the streets and engage with them. An older Caribbean Muslim that I interviewed introduced me to some of the young men and he pointed out where they hung out in the evenings. These were the pre-internet days of 1991 and so mobile phones were a rare sight. Meeting up with people was about knowing their patterns and habits and being lucky.

Heading off for weeks of recording reminds me at least of the title of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. In *Reality Radio*, Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva (also known as radio producers The Kitchen Sisters), brilliantly encapsulate that feeling of isolation:

Because as inspiring and educational and challenging as producing documentaries is, it can get long and lonesome driving in the middle of nowhere to an interview, listening back to tape that only you will hear until it's all cut and produced and on the air, knowing you couldn't figure out how to keep the best line of the whole interview in, and that now no one will ever know about it but you. (The Kitchen Sisters 2010, 38)

The twenty-four hours of material I recorded over many weeks and long night stays in my memory but mostly in small boxes of audio tape in my loft. The documentary started to take shape as soon as I got to know a group of young men who would meet on street corners in Handsworth, near a fried chicken takeaway shop. We got to know each other over several encounters. Late one Thursday evening I arrived in Birmingham and met them at their usual spot. On this occasion they were keen that I come back to a flat and interview them there. In addition, there was someone they wanted me to meet. The person in question was a young white man called Wayne; he was getting ready to convert to Islam the next day at the Friday prayers at the city's main mosque. Wayne talked into the early hours of the morning sharing details about his life that even some of his friends were hearing for the first time, especially revelations about his parents. After recording his conversion Wayne invited me home, to a seat at the kitchen table, to record a conversation with his mum and dad: his mum a sex worker and his father, her pimp.

Chapter 5: Sound and Invisibility

In 2003, I was sitting in the basement of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem New York; a friend was working there in the press office, and we were going to meet for a coffee when she finished work. I was distracted from looking out of the window by a man walking in my direction wheeling a large box – perhaps it was two boxes one on top of the other - through the reading room and right past where I was sitting. As he neared me, handwritten across the boxes in black ink in large letters was the name “Malcolm X”. I asked him what was in there and he said, “It’s all Malcolm’s stuff”. He wheeled on and through into a Staff Only area. When I met my friend Joan apart from the normal enquiries, I only really had one question; what’s the story with the Malcolm X boxes? Joan explained.

Three years earlier one of Malcolm X's daughters left home in New York to start a new life in Florida. Her father’s personal effects, his letters, speeches, diaries, some clothes, shoes etc – were stored in boxes in her apartment, and so along with her own possessions she packed and left. On arrival in Florida, she deposited much of her cargo in a storage facility. Time passed, she defaulted on the payments and the storage facility owners did what they normally do in these circumstances: they take ownership of the unit and sell off the contents.

A Florida flea market trader bought the contents and unwittingly became the owner of perhaps the most personal part of the archive of one of the most significant American leaders of the twentieth Century. Realising that he was onto something the flea market trader switched to sell his Malcolm X goods to an internet auction site. Howard Dodson, the director of the

Schomburg at the time, was in the office when he received a call from a friend. "Go to eBay. I think I've seen something," his friend said.

There, he discovered Malcolm's letters, speeches, and diaries up for auction, to the highest bidder. Malcolm X's family and friends all leapt into action led by lawyer Joseph Fleming. Months of legal wrangling ensued, and the eBay sale was halted. Undisclosed sums of money were exchanged, and several large wooden crates arrived in the basement of the Schomburg, being wheeled past me.

Sometimes documentary ideas present themselves almost fully formed.

I wanted to tell this story and so I pitched it, successfully, to Radio 4. I assumed I could assemble a cast of the main players responsible for recovering the possessions, but I wanted to include a conversation with one of the daughters, in the Schomburg, with some of the recovered archive. I succeeded in contacting Ilyasah Shabazz, Malcolm X's third daughter and she agreed to be involved. She took me to the meet friends of her father, to the Audubon Ballroom where he was gunned down and a level of trust grew quickly. And she agreed to meet me at the Schomburg to look at some of the archive.

We met outside the Schomburg, situated fittingly on Malcolm X Boulevard in Harlem. Harlem was where her father honed his electrifying oratorical skills. Entering the building, people greeted Ilyasah as if they were greeting a relative. Sharing the lift with us, a young man almost bows and claims that he loves her like a sister.

Her naturally high spirits understandably dissipate when an archivist closed the door on us in a small conference room, leaving us with a small sample from one of the boxes: a collection of her father's letters to her mother, two of his diaries and his maroon leather-bound copy of the Koran.

The book rendered Ilyasah speechless. Minutes passed. I imagined that she had drifted off to a place that most of us could barely imagine. On 21 February, 1965, she was in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom with her mother and two of her sisters when three gunmen in the audience shot her father dead. As a two-year-old, Ilyasah was too young to remember. Her two older sisters were not nearly as fortunate.

Ilyasah sat and looked through me. I sat opposite, recording the silence; the only sound was the whirring of the air conditioning cooling the building. Ilyasah's demeanour changed profoundly when faced with these personal reminders of her father and of course her mother who had died just a few years earlier.

Here's what Ilyasah said: "Ok, I don't know what good I'm gonna be now. Is there something you wanna ask me?"

Ilyasah was in no mood to talk. I was already thinking that this section is not going to work. It was emotionally too raw, and I am not going to force her to participate if it's just too demanding. I said (off tape) something like: "Ilyasah, if you want to talk it's up to you; if you don't, that's fine too."

We both sat and occasionally Ilyasah would look up at me; then she returned to stroking her father's Koran. I was silently willing her to pick up and read the letter on top from her father to her mother. Reading upside down, I could see the address was "Mecca" and the date was "1964"

In the silence, I started to imagine where Ilyasah's thoughts had travelled, and it was some considerable distance away from a recording for the BBC. In the documentary I tried to suggest sonically that Ilyasah was simply remembering her father, his recorded speeches, his powerful voice, his teaching of how America was not working in the interests of African Americans.

I was still recording the silence. This small room in the Schomburg was now our space, Ilyasah's space. Occasionally and habitually, I would glance at the meters on my recording machine – have I enough tape? Enough battery? But if Ilyasah doesn't speak that's fine too. This was in so many ways a sacred moment and I was aware that this was a moment of precious remembrance between a daughter and her father, and I happened to be present; my instinct was to remain silent and if I could have become invisible, that too.

After perhaps ten minutes the silence was broken, Ilyasah looked at me, took a big intake of breath and decided to respond to the material in front of her:

Ilyasah: (Reading, from Diary) "Around whites for the first time in my life." That was the first time he had absolutely no conscience of his ethnicity. "The whites don't seem white (laughs) ...Islam actually removed differences. I felt alone... lonely"

Awww... Awwww You know my father was you know... mush! wow this is really amazing. He's just a regular man. (Picking up a letter)

"I turned my car in the other day for a black one, just like Brother Curtis 3X's, but a four door. You will like it when you see it. I maybe I will relent, go out of my mind and let you drive it. Smile. (Laughter between the two of us)

What a lovely letter! "I didn't understand what you were trying to tell me on the phone yesterday so you will have to take time and put it in a letter. The main thing I want you to do is to be happy and enjoy yourself. You will stay young and beautiful longer that way. Keep me post-"How beautiful is that?! Most women would absolutely want their husbands to write them a letter like this.

It was clear that Ilyasah had moved on from the silence. It was also becoming clear that this was a letter that she hadn't read or fully absorbed in this way before. It was also clear that she stopped short of using the verb "to die" in her phrase: "most women would absolutely *die*..." The horrific and sudden death of her mother in an accidental fire triggered by her own grandson (also called Malcolm) was perhaps still too recent. She happily read on – this was one of the letters from Malcolm to Betty from his Hajj pilgrimage in 1964. She continued.

"Keep me posted on how you're fixed for money. I don't want you to be out there broke and at the same time I don't want you to break me. Smile (more laughter from Ilyasah) I don't know if I'll be out there this weekend, maybe Friday or Saturday or whether it will be the early part of next week. Whatever our holy apostle says. Kiss Atallah for me and have Atallah kiss you for me in return. Give the greetings to all the believers, make friends with everyone, speak ill of no one and fault with no one and thank Allah for our many many blessings. As-Salam Alaykum, your tired husband, Malcolm X".

Pause. My gosh... you know and after seeing all this, you'd just fall in love with this man.
You'll fall in love with him.

The joy that these recovered possessions brought to Ilyasah was clear to see and hear.

Chapter 6: Voice as Everything

One of the many positives of the internet was the publication and sharing of many hours of archived material of people like Baldwin; of course, you notice his sense of style, how he smokes a cigarette, his hand gestures, his bulging eyes and, of course, his voice. Baldwin's voice whether delivering a speech, in conversation, in a debate or being interviewed can shift from a warm velvety embrace to a harsh, rasping jab to the solar plexus. Through Baldwin's voice you can intuit the places he has been from boy preacher in the pulpits of Harlem, combative debater in public education spaces like Cambridge University or under the bright lights of television studios with chat show personalities like Dick Cavett. Across the range of archive a speech pattern was emerging for me and that was his frequent use of the first person, or the times he makes autobiographical references to his birthplace, his birth date, the date he left New York. Whilst listening to a famous University of Cambridge Union debate between Baldwin and conservative commentator and founding editor of the *National Review*, William F Buckley, I was struck by a connecting fibre linking Baldwin to Douglass. There was one point in Baldwin's address that for me was riveting and packed a powerful historical punch:

I am stating very seriously, and this is not an overstatement that I picked the cotton and I carried to market, and I built the railroads.... under someone else's whip for nothing. For nothing. The southern oligarchy which has until today so much power in Washington and therefore some power in the world was created by my labour and my sweat and the violation of my women and the murder of my children. This - in the land of the free and the home of the brave. And no-one can challenge that statement....it is a matter of historical record. (University of Cambridge Union debate, 18 February 1965)

Baldwin's evocation of the violent history of race in America in the first person was the moment I saw the connective line taking me back to Douglass; a palimpsest of the African

American experience. Douglass' three autobiographies were not conceived as narratives exclusive to himself; Douglass was more than aware that the use of the first person represented the collective experience of enslaved Africans on American soil.

My aim was to produce a forty-five minute documentary about James Baldwin, as much as possible, in Baldwin's own words. Baldwin's words – whether written or spoken – were essentially bearing witness to social and political forces that had befallen him and millions of other African Americans. I was reminded of the ex-slave from Tennessee in the preface to Julius Lester's, *To Be A Slave* who reminded his interviewer from the Federal Writer's Project in the 1930s that if you want “to know negro history... you have to talk to the person who wore the shoe”. And conveniently Baldwin, like Douglass, spent a lifetime as a writer and commentator talking from the perspective of the person who wore the shoe.

I set out with the aim of reconstructing a narrative, not in any sense a definitive narrative, but a version of Baldwin's life, as shared through hundreds of hours of archival material. I sat in my office at Broadcasting House listening through to hours of tape delivered to me from a number of BBC repositories, making notes of content and most importantly time codes. At home, often late into the night, I would make my way through videos of interviews and documentaries about Baldwin or about aspects of black life in the USA.

Every documentary-maker will have their own way of constructing and shaping a narrative. As a trainee producer perhaps more than other producers I was introduced to various styles and methods on the five-week introduction to my two-year traineeship I underwent at the BBC Radio Training centre at Grafton House, a stone's throw from Great Portland Street

underground station. There were six of us who made up the 1989-91 Radio 4 trainees. We were put through our paces in a series of introductory classes, covering practically every area of work a new producer would need to know: live recording; studio recording; tape editing (in our case chalk and blade editing); media law; location recording; interviewing skills. When it came to long form documentary-making a few of the BBC's leading exponents were invited to meet us in radio Training to share their experience and their craft. Through visits like these we imbibed almost surreptitiously a set of rules and codes as to how to make a successful radio documentary. Most of the knowledge and guidance being passed along was technical; use of stereo microphones (almost exclusively for the gathering of "atmos", meaning atmosphere, the general sounds of location, whether it's the sound of a park, beach or a noisy café or street); the mono microphones would be used for interviews, ideally recorded indoors, windows and doors shutting out the outside world. As things turned out, I loved the sound that the stereo mics captured and I immediately decided to break that convention by recording pretty much all of my documentary material on one mic – my stereo mic.

One of the conventions of documentary-making that we were taught at Radio Training was to gather a cast of experts who could explain and contextualise the content. I arrived at *Jimmy's Blues* (Radio 3, 2004) as a more confident and experienced producer and my aim was take another route. I had set myself a creative and intellectual challenge to have James Baldwin, "who wore the shoe", tell his own story, rather than have it told via the ranks of Baldwin biographers, experts, aficionados; they most certainly have their place. But I wanted to reserve the commission I had earned for Baldwin himself, for *Jimmy's Blues*.

Another significant learning experience was attending a new feature-making course in the late 1990s led by Piers Plowright, called *Featuristics*. Plowright was a hugely influential drama and documentaries producer. I consider myself very fortunate to have got to know him as a colleague and mentor. The five-day course was aimed at feature-makers in the earlier stages of their career. The essence of how Piers taught, was close to a psychoanalytical psychotherapy session; Piers would say very little but would allow you to talk and hear your words come back to you. Additionally, he would impress upon us as participants and as producers to listen more, listen deeper, listen wider. With Baldwin, inspired by Piers, I wanted to listen to Baldwin's voice, and his ideas, and I wanted the audience to experience this too.

An early clip I used in *Jimmy's Blues* was for me an almost perfect example of a Baldwin-on-Baldwin stand-alone clip:

My father was the son of a slave...very peculiar, very rigid, very proud man...his name comes from his master, from his mother's master...when they were slaves in Louisiana ...every negro, in America had that name, the name which was on the bill of sale when he was sold and you became Mr Baldwin's Nigger or Mr Jones' Nigger and when you became free this was the only name you had. God knows what I was called when I was in Africa, there's no way now of finding out.

Over a century earlier when Douglass speaks of the hopelessness of not knowing his own age, indeed, few slaves, if any, knew of their birthday, there's a distinct echo when Baldwin speaks of the hopelessness of never knowing his name "when I was in Africa". In both cases with Baldwin and Douglass the first person telling of the story creates an accessibility and empathy for their stories and to the wider story of being enslaved.

It was not always possible to locate audio clips of Baldwin that stood alone so clearly technically and editorially. I had to concede that I would, in the end, need a presenter's voice to help turn a few editorial corners. I needed someone who would not in any way drag the focus away from Baldwin but would somehow support the narrative in the most subtle of ways. I found that person in the novelist and essayist Darryl Pinckney. Darryl had written numerous essays on Baldwin for the *New York Review of Books*; these were essays of intense sensitivity and knowledge. In reading them, I felt that Pinckney was persuasively guiding the reader to know that this one-time boy preacher turned novelist, playwright and essayist was the voice that the twentieth and twenty-first century United States of America still needed to listen to. Darryl's voice and delivery, soft, almost a whisper, gave the impression that he was reading from wings, leaving the whole stage for the star of the show, Jimmy. I will always be grateful for Darryl's generosity and collusion in the illusion I was attempting to create.

Chapter 7: Secrets and Success

Some stories take a while to come together and sometimes it can take a while to alight upon the right way to tell a story. Both observations were true in the case of the story about Caribbean migration to the UK and to the US which was the catalyst for my deepening interest in oral testimonies and oral history; it was also the idea I pitched at the BBC to win a place on their Radio Producer's Traineeship in 1989. The documentary I eventually made in 1998 was entitled *Secrets and Ties* and coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush.

Two authors in separate studies offered observations about Caribbean migration that I wanted to link and explore in a radio documentary.

The first was Peter Fryer's seminal study of the history of black people in Britain, *Staying Power* (1984), in a chapter entitled "The Settlers, The Post War Immigration" where he raised an important question in my mind about the significance of the arrival of the Windrush. In June 1948 the HMT Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks carrying 492, mainly Jamaican passengers. The ship's arrival was alleged to have heralded the great post-war wave of migration from the Caribbean to Britain. What puzzled me was that the numbers of arrivals according to Fryer, represented not a wave, but "a trickle of West Indian workers into Britain". For five years, following the Windrush in 1948, the total number of West Indians in Britain remained at approximately 4,000. In 1954, however, 24,000 West Indians arrived in the UK; 26,000 in 1956; 22,000 in 1957; 16,000 in 1958. "Ten years after the Empire

Windrush there were in Britain about 125,000 West Indians who had come over since the end of the war.” (Fryer, 1984, p372).

The second revelation goes back to university in 1988 and a twelve-week American Culture seminar on Immigration. One of the set texts was Maldwyn Allen Jones’ *American Immigration* (1960). Jones devoted a couple of pages to Caribbean migration to the United States, which was much more than most. There were a few lines that stood out like beacons for me.

But the McCarran Walter Act of 1952 entirely changed the situation. Allowed hitherto to make use of the unfilled portion of the large British quota, the West Indians were now allocated a tiny quota of their own. This effectively brought the movement to the United States to an end; henceforth West Indians migrated to London, Birmingham and other British industrial cities (Jones, 1960, 295)

What I was attempting to explore in my documentary was why after the arrival of the Windrush there was a trickle rather than the oft-heralded wave of Caribbean migration. It raised in me an important but unanswered question about the spike in numbers of arrivals in the UK after 1954: was this really a call and response to the motherland, or was it the sound of the United States McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 closing the doors of Ellis Island to West Indian migrants?

How this story could be told in a thirty-minute time slot on Radio 4 was a perhaps my biggest challenge. I was sure that I wanted somebody’s personal testimony to sit at the heart of this story. For audiences to get closer to understanding the human experience at the heart of migration, then caring deeply about an individual would be useful. I imagined a scenario on a Caribbean Island, much like the island of my parents, St Kitts, in the early 1950s, and the

McCarran -Walter Act has just been passed making it much more difficult for West Indians to relocate to, or even visit, the United States. I pictured two Caribbean teenagers sitting on a beach, aged about 15 years old, discussing their choices and where they would like to end up living. One of them wants to go to the United States, the other, decides on England. With the help of journalist Leslie Goffe, we found two people who pretty much fitted this scenario. In Brooklyn, we meet Allan Smith, the owner of a successful bakery in Flatbush, arguably the heart of New York's Caribbean community; in Coventry, UK, his cousin, Oliver, a retired carpenter. The cousins did in fact find themselves as teenagers on a beach in St Vincent talking about their futures, once it became clear that staying in the Caribbean was not a viable option for either of them.

The American cousin, Allan, was an American success story of sorts: successful self-made businessman, very comfortable and the owner of multiple properties in New York and in St Vincent. He had been determined to come to the US at all costs. He waited until 1958 when a successful visa application finally came through and he followed his aunt to New York City. Obstacles like segregation were realities but not insurmountable hurdles to navigate, he was able to build a successful business or two and secure his family's future.

When I met Allan's cousin Oliver, in Coventry, it was a Sunday afternoon. He was a retired carpenter and living in a small, terraced house bustling with family, as was the norm in his family for children and grandchildren to come together every Sunday. The aroma of Caribbean cooking hung heavy and sweet in the air, even in the living room, where we retreated to record our interview. Oliver was happy enough to talk and to hear details about his cousin in New York – I had only just returned from visiting him in New York. After about an hour I was not

really getting much beyond the stock answers about Caribbean migration to Britain: his answers and observations were peppered with references to “helping the mother country” and the cold weather.

We were now well into a second hour, and I asked again for Oliver to go back to that moment as a teenager on a beach in St Vincent with his cousin, debating their futures, whether Britain or USA. My instincts were telling me that given a chance Oliver would have followed his cousin and migrated to New York. I was aware that I was asking Oliver to let down a protective veil that has kept him safe in England for forty years. Eventually, in an unexpected burst of confidence and emotion, Oliver confirmed my suspicion that he would have preferred to have migrated to the United States. He also made clear his sense of disappointment in Britain, betrayal perhaps, that Britain has not been “great” and that he didn’t experience the warmth, protection and love that a mother might throw around a child. Bitterness underpinned his observation that “it’s not a mother country anymore”.

The combined observations and figures in the books of Peter Fryer and Maldwyn Allen Jones now seemed to make more human sense.

The Windrush held another secret. In the same year 1998 I was the co-producer of another project for BBC Radio 4 exploring this historic event; this time a radio drama-documentary entitled *Something To Declare*. There was a clear division of labour: my colleague Marion Nancarrow produced the drama elements and I looked after the documentary components. We joined forces with the Royal Court Theatre’s Young Writers’ Programme, led at the time by Ola Animashawun. My idea was to have young writers and performers write, research, perform

and ultimately produce a production for Radio 4 that would enable them to immerse themselves in British post-war history so that they can come away with a better understanding of 1948 and arrival of the Windrush.

In documentary terms the core narrative was Caribbean immigration and the arrival of the Windrush. One of the young writers was Valerie Vamanrov who showed great enthusiasm for deep research into this side of the story. I sent her on a research assignment to the National Archives in Kew to photocopy the ship's manifest; the aim was to put some names and personalities to the statistics of the passenger numbers.

When Valerie returned, she seemed both excited about having gone to the Archives, but also a little anxious. She confessed that she might have photocopied the wrong list. I remember us spreading out these large sheets of paper on an empty desk in my office in Broadcasting House. What we were reading was a list of Polish names, sixty-six women and children's names to be exact. There were the names of the Caribbean passengers all heading to addresses in London, Birmingham, and other places. But why Polish women and children sailing to England on the Windrush? It soon became clear that we had discovered that on the same ship and on the same crossing, sixty-six Polish refugees were being reunited with their husbands, brothers, fathers who during the second world war were fighting alongside British forces to liberate the world from the threat of Nazism.

Valerie and I immediately set about locating one of the Polish passengers. We searched for the younger names first and alighted on a fourteen-year-old girl called Aurelia Labeledz. Within a day or so we were on a train to Northampton to interview her.

Chapter 8: Platform Change

Thursday morning, October 3, 2014, was a game-changer for everybody working in audio, whether they were aware or not. This was the morning that episode one of the first season of *Serial* dropped. This ground-breaking series of podcasts was investigating the murder of Hae Min Lee. She was an eighteen-year-old Baltimore high school student, allegedly killed by her ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed. After the first three episodes, I was hooked. The storytelling was compelling, with the host and reporter Sarah Koenig seemingly drawing a seat up next to the listener, not speaking down, to go through the complexities of the story in real time. In the style and tone of the programmes I could hear a distinct difference between podcasting and broadcasting. One obvious factor was that each episode was a different length; they were as long as the podcast makers needed them to be. In radio, the clock and the schedule and its uniformity is central to how the schedule works; this was radio conventions being thrown from the rooftops.

In my capacity as a Commissioning Editor and as a former programme maker I knew change was happening and I wanted audiences and programme makers to hear the change. I contacted Ira Glass, the editor in Chief of *Serial* and the originator of *This American Life*, the editorial and business home of *Serial*. I wanted to ask Ira if he would allow BBC Radio to broadcast *Serial*. The biggest challenge for me came not from Ira but from the BBC. Some of my colleagues in scheduling were concerned about the durations – every episode was a different length. How was this going to work? How do we fill the rest of the hour? What if they go over an hour? All reasonable questions, but answers and solutions that were not insurmountable.

After a few conversations over a few weeks Ira agreed and Radio 4 Extra agreed to deal with the duration variable and we broadcast the series of twelve programmes in twelve consecutive evenings, coinciding with the final episode drop from *Serial*.

This radical change in how and where people consume audio content has only gathered pace from 2014. Bauwens and Pierson (2015) remind us that the radical change is mainly in the platform of consumption; in fact where radio listening numbers were dwindling in younger audiences (in BBC Radio 4 terms this was age 25-45) listening as an activity was certainly not disappearing.

(Marshall) McLuhan has drawn our attention to the fact that obsolescence does not simply lead to the disappearance of a medium, but rather restarts a new circular movement in which old meanings and characteristics of a medium are retrieved, albeit never in the same form and way as they used to be. That is why in the “morass of audio-visual content” we are dealing with today, a lot of old-established programme concepts, genres and formats have been recovered from the past – like the old talent scouting shows of early television’s past – but remediated in a style that appeals to twenty-first century audiences. (Bauwens and Pierson 2015, 34)

There was also the hope that podcasting was also going to democratise the voices and stories we hear in audio form. The bar to entry was considerably lower – after all you could make a podcast on your phone and upload it.

Radio broadcasting and podcasting are still dominated by large organisations like NPR and the BBC, and any number of burgeoning production houses from the music industry, book publishers to galleries and museums. The dominant voices behind the scenes, producing, editing, commissioning, and funding new content hasn’t changed significantly from when I

came into the industry over thirty years ago; to revisit the observation of former BBC Director General, audio as an industry remains “hideously white”.

The BBC’s Annual Report 2019-20 tells us that in 2019 of all jobs advertised on the *BBC Careers Hub* 42% of the applicants were Black and brown people: 20% of those were hired. In the same year 58% of applicants were white; 80% were hired. It didn’t improve in 2020. It’s the not the numbers alone that are significant – it’s the stark experiential contrast in applying for positions and not being successful.

In 2020 more Black and brown people applied and the split was 50-50 in terms of applications. But still 20% were Black and brown hires; and whites also remained at 80%.

When I worked in New York at WNYC Studios, between 2016 and 2020, the company had their own crisis around representation and accusations of racism. It hinged on Black and brown staff not being listened to. The culture at WNYC was deemed to be broken in 2017. Four senior white men (three radio hosts and the Head of Content) were fired, asked to leave, resigned, retired – combinations of the above. A culture of sexism, racism, and workplace harassment had been allowed to grow. Most disturbing to me and to many others was the dismissal of three black female co-hosts of a new show to the station in 2007 called *The Takeaway*. The revolving door of dispensability saw the departure of Adaora Udoji, Farai Chideya and Celeste Hedlee, all brilliant journalists, leaving John Hockenberry as the sole white and male host. Their complaints to the company made no difference. Only when a journalist wrote about the decade of abuse and bullying at WNYC did the organisation set about a process of culture change and transformation in 2018. The one thing that didn’t come about

was any meaningful change to the structure and processes at the company – reversing the alarming figures for Black and brown staff retention for example – on average Black and brown staff stayed at NYPR for 1 to 3 years. Why? A number of reasons but mainly you leave any situation when you know you are not being heard or seen.

There are now many examples of broadcasts and podcasts being produced where black and brown people are “the face” of the stories, or in some cases merely narrating a script without any meaningful editorial involvement in research, producing or reporting. This is what I would call “audio blackface”, where, like the minstrel shows in the United States throughout much of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, black performers were forced to wear make-up to imitate the appearance of a black person. In audio terms if the editorial hand on the tiller is still a white, middle-class, often male university-educated person then some of the stories that need to be told will either remain silent or they run a risk of being shallow reflections of the stories that could and should be deeper.

The act of listening has defined and shaped my professional and personal life. When I launched BBC Radio’s The Listening Project in March 2012 it proved to be a coalescence of the various listening skills and experiences I had acquired over many years. Inspired by our editorial muses at StoryCorps in Brooklyn, New York, we suggested the producers asked their participants as they researched and planned each conversation: why does it matter? In other words, why have these two people sat down to have a conversation or as our friends at StoryCorps in New York would frame it, to have ‘a conversation of a lifetime’. The answer to this question will help give the conversation purpose and steer the conversation away from two people having an aimless chat. The aim is to encourage people to listen actively and generously

to the narrative of the other. At the time of writing the British Library's Listening Project collection stands at 2,185 conversations available for members of the public to listen to free online. What I did not account for is how the content we were creating might "matter" to other people and organisations? Holly Gilbert, Cataloguer of Digital Multimedia Collections at The British Library participated in a conference at the University of Reading's Henley Business School in March 2019. Addressing delegates from a wide range of businesses Holly spoke of the interest in the archive from areas like healthcare professionals, medical sciences alongside a wide range of sociolinguists. The Listening Project's everyday use of language (accent, syntax) to discuss a range of experiences, feelings, thoughts, fears, joys is proving invaluable, rather than the often slightly self-conscious stilted nature of conversation when a person is being interviewed by an expert rather than chatting with a relative or close friend. In areas of health and well-being business leaders are listening to the conversations and are seeing training and learning opportunities for their staff. It was always my hope that in my many acts of listening to people who have historically not been offered much space or in some cases any space at all to share their story that many audiences will benefit from the experience; digital platforms now make it easier for these conversations to be heard and in perpetuity. I believe the best audio is where you can hear the act of listening.

In the early 2000s I became a mentor and a friend to Jay Mukoro, a young trainee producer at the BBC. Brought up in London to Nigerian parents, Jay was inquisitive and very smart; I believe he had a bachelor's and two master's degrees. New to the industry he learned by listening to a broad range of content, old and new, including my own work, and whenever we met, he would fire off questions and observations about all aspects of my work as a producer. His curiosity served as an early catalyst for me to describe and reflect on the audio paths I've been on. I didn't have audio mentors who were black and working class. The audio world I

entered was narrower in so many ways: today, for example, it would be inconceivable for me to make a documentary about Douglass with no female experts on tape. Jay died in a tragic accident in 2014, but had he lived, I'm certain he would have taken full advantage of the many more platforms and outlets for creatives to produce their work beyond the traditional destinations like the BBC. Jay, like younger creatives from myriad diverse backgrounds, would have moved freely across television, online video, radio and podcasting to craft the stories he wanted to tell.

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