

We are here! Black Feminist Exploration

Overview and Context

This case study outlines the learning from the design and running of the '*We Are Here!*' retreat that took place in Uckfield, East Sussex in October 2012. *We are here!* was a public engagement project run by Ego Ahaiwe, a UCL student on the MA Archives and Records Management at the Department of Information Studies. The retreat attendees were black women from academic and non-academic backgrounds, living in different parts of the UK, and who gathered together to explore Black British feminism. They planned to use the ideas generated from these explorations as the basis for a Special Edition of *Feminist Review* to be published in 2014. The publication of the Special Edition coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the first Black Feminist edition of *Feminist Review* published in 1984.

This case study identifies key findings from the project and makes recommendations for any future projects of this nature.

The aim of *We are here!*:

The key purpose of the weekend retreat was to develop ideas through group work, discussions and presentations for a Special Edition of the *Feminist Review* Publication. It was hoped that the team of women would be committed beyond the weekend to making the publication happen.

The audience of the project:

The weekend is targeted at those who see themselves as feminists or are inclined towards feminism and who perhaps find themselves with more questions than answers, particularly about the place of Black British lives, voices and representation in relation to feminism. The participants were all of a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) background aged between 24 – 60 years.

What happened?

Eighteen participants took part in the *We are here!* project. The programme over the weekend was intensive, and involved:

A Roundtable discussion with:

- Professor Denise Ferreira da Silva (Queen Mary's University): 'Radical Praxis – A few Words, some considerations and a couple of suggestions'
- Suzanne Scafe (London South Bank) 'Black Feminism as Praxis: Ways Forward from the Past'
- Professor Joan Anim-Addo (Goldsmiths): 'Reconsidering Activism: Creating Writing Spaces'
- Yasmin Gunaratnum (Goldsmiths): 'Writing Life's Limits'
- Professor Heidi Safia Mirza (Institute of Education): Black British Feminism

Workshops on:

- Practical Writing
- Brainstorming the Special Issue
- Developing collaborative Ideas
- Not Writing but Documenting

Sharing ideas session and outlining plans for development



Facts and Figures

18 participants took part in the *We are here!* retreat.

The project was led by Ego Ahaiwe, UCL Department of Information Studies, who was awarded a **UCL Provost's Award for Public Engagement** for student engager of the year in 2014.

The *Feminist Review* (issue 108) on Black British Feminism was published in 2014.

The project was funded by the UCL Public Engagement Unit under the Beacon Bursary funding Scheme.

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Learning from the Process

Emerging themes from the evaluation

'*We are here!*' provides an excellent example of how UCL students can incorporate public engagement as part of their student experience and studies. Ego Ahaiwe's energy and enthusiasm stems from her interest in how archives and archival practice can be used to give a voice to the experience of often marginalised or hidden groups within society. The UCL's Beacon Bursary funding enabled Ego Ahaiwe to turn her ideas into reality; initiating interest, activity and creativity on the subject of Black British Feminism.

The project was successful in bringing together black women from different backgrounds, both academic and non-academic, in the UK to explore the topic of Black British Feminism.

The weekend retreat was an excellent mechanism to provide time and space for a deeper exploration of what it means to be black and female in a British context. The stimulus provided by the discussions, group work and presentations generated a range of ideas and excitement. A number of future projects and activities emerged from discussions including: plays, exhibitions, radio documentaries, and a black feminist arts festival, in addition to the contributions the group would be making to the Feminist Review Special Edition on Black British Feminism.

The key purpose of the weekend was to develop ideas through group work, discussions and presentations for a Special Edition of the Feminist Review Publication. The group involved in *We are here!* were keen to not let the experience be a one off.

Further talks, meetings, practical workshops and visits, will be took place after the residential, as well as an on-going dialogue through phone and email. A support structure and informal general information and support sharing group has been formed to enable participants to continue the relationships formed. Participants have also continued to work with Dr Gemma Romain (UCL Geography) and the UCL Petrie Museum in the recent project Exploring Egyptian Sculpture.

The project lead felt that public engagement, in the form of engaging a variety of voices and perspectives made a substantial difference to the success and impact of Special Edition of the Feminist Review Publication.

We are here! created a new and innovative platform for learning. The experience of *We are here!* was a unique and had a life changing effect on some of those who participated. The achievements of *We are here!* was recognised and celebrated by the UCL Provost's Awards for Public Engagement in 2014.

What worked well?

- the variety and diversity of speakers, facilitators and contributors meant that different stories and experiences could be shared.
- the venue and going away for the weekend worked well, this allowed additional time to think about ideas that came up during the day. It also created a safe space to communicate and share.
- the structure and programming of the weekend ensured time for discussion.
- having a clear outcome, i.e. the focus on producing a publication.

What could be done differently?

- understanding the process and procedures in regards to UCL finance systems was a bit of a barrier and meant that the project lead was unable to be more responsive and flexible in their approach.
- a lot of material audio from sessions, photos, footage interviews was collected, but there has not been time to go through it all collectively or uploaded it up for the blog that already exists.

