

On questioning dominant narratives



Historian and writer Edna Bonhomme on the importance of self-affirmation, challenging dominant narratives, and shedding light on overlooked stories.

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As told to Charmaine Li, 2081 words.

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Can you talk about the personal path that led you to where you are today as a historian and writer?

I had a circuitous route to both history-making and writing, insofar that I began studying biology in my undergraduate education and wanted to understand the human body on a molecular level. So I spent a lot of time thinking about how the world works in those terms, taking multivariable calculus and thinking about the Grand Unified Theory. As an undergrad in Portland, Oregon, I also volunteered and lived in a cooperative in an anarchist house with people of all stripes. I lived with people who were anthropologists and philosophers, and we had chickens and a small garden. That's when I felt the need to connect more to actual people and organize with leftist communities.

Afterward, I volunteered for a center that provided healthcare and services to homeless people, intravenous drug users, and sex workers. And that led me on a path of thinking more deeply about public health, the social constructions of race, and the determinants of health. From there, I ended up doing my Master's research that focused on sex workers through the lens of gender, race, and sexuality. Then, I started thinking about the history of plague and other epidemics as a way to understand not only how we see the body today, but how disease formations and categories change over time—with emphasis on the Global South, particularly North Africa, the Caribbean and beyond. It was important for me to write the histories of spaces and peoples that have often been demonized by the US government and by people who don't understand Arab/Islamic science or Black traditional healers. So my desire to study history and write about stories that are often poorly understood was my way of trying to correct the literature that erases people like me.

In terms of writing, I think it's still an identity I'm working on. It has a lot to do with the fact that as someone who grew up poor, Black, and working-class in Miami with immigrant parents—both of whom are from Haiti—I didn't always see people who were writers who looked like me, with the exception of [Edwidge Danticat](#), whose work I read as a young person. I'm still wrestling with that. I don't always feel like a writer, or that I'm good at writing, but I try to invoke the words of [Toni Morrison](#), who saw writing as a pathway to excavating Black histories and stories. Part of why she was so successful is because she pushed aside the negative ideas and perceptions about herself, or what racists might want her to think about herself, as a Black person writing. I try to take the spirit of [Octavia Butler](#), another Black writer, who said—and I'm paraphrasing—"Let me affirm for myself that I'm a writer and let me affirm for myself that I can be an award-winning writer." These are the things that allow me to think and imagine myself as part of that community.

Another medium where you're telling stories is through your podcast, *Decolonization in Action*. What was the impetus for starting that?

When I was a kid, my family was always listening to Haitian radio to understand what was going on there politically. As left-leaning people, they were concerned about the rise of conservative forces and elements of the former dictator. So, I always had an interest in alternative and underground radio, as well as different kinds of podcasts, or what we now call "podcasts," like *This American Life*, or *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross. They were all part of my cultural upbringing.

With *Decolonization in Action*, I wanted to put forth some of the pressing questions I've had since living in Germany. I know a lot about British, American, French imperialism, even Portuguese and Spanish imperialism. But for a long time, I didn't know much about German imperialism on the African continent and how people are still fighting for their memory—and even the actual physical objects from their ancestors. So, I connected with some decolonial and anti-colonial activists, most of whom are from the Global South and/or from families of African descent or Asian descent. I was meeting so many people and thought that it would be great to have a platform to think more deeply about these questions as well as to promote the work of people who are trying to change systems, whether that be through art, film, or research. I was also trying to question the term 'decolonial' and what that means: Is that a term we should even be using? Are some people using that term in a self-fulfilling way? Or are they actually connected to some of the movements that are happening? It's something that I'm trying to think about actively.

Where did you learn the skills needed to create the podcast?

As a postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute, I was given the freedom to work on a number of projects. Alongside colleagues, I co-organized reading groups and a workshop. The podcast was another thing that came out of my research fellowship. I went to a two-day workshop training through the institute about how to create a podcast and that was really helpful. But basically, Kristyna Comer—my collaborator—and I learned how to do it through trial and error. We learned how to use audio editing software and to upload RSS feeds on SoundCloud and Spotify.

Through practice, I'm now able to do it from start to finish by myself—so contacting people, conducting the interview, editing with audio software, and then uploading it to the platforms. It feels good to have a system and rhythm in place, but it's a lot of work. At one point, I was really hard on myself and thought, 'Oh my god, why am I so slow?' And then I realized, 'Oh wait, people don't edit their own podcasts—they have teams for this. I get it now.' It's not like Terry Gross is editing on a Friday night at 10 pm *[laughs], *there are actual producers.

You co-organized the exhibition Cartographies of Care, held at alpha nova & galerie futura in Berlin, alongside anthropologist Nnenna Onuoha in February 2020. It explores how healing is imagined and practiced in African diasporic bodies as well as examines the often-difficult experiences of Black Berliners with the German healthcare system. Where did the idea for the exhibition come from?

As a historian of medicine and science specifically and as someone who's looked at questions around epidemics and what sickness is, I've always been interested in thinking about health processes. On a personal level, as someone who is Black in Europe, I've also had mixed experiences with the healthcare system. On one hand, healthcare is provided for most people who live here and are registered, but that doesn't necessarily mean there's always care—or that people are ready and willing to be compassionate.

In the first year I lived here, I had conversations with many of my friends, particularly Black people, who were having similar experiences. Things weren't always quite right with respect to doctors. In some cases, things were traumatic. At the same time, some people were like, 'Well, I don't really do the allopatric biomedical stuff all the time—I drink tea, do yoga, etc.' There are different ways in which people are figuring out how to navigate this healthcare system or connecting to their bodies and ancestral ways of healing. In collaboration with Nnenna Onuoha, who's a Nigerian-Ghanaian cultural anthropologist and filmmaker, we wanted to try to document some of that and get a taste of what people are doing to survive as Black people living in Berlin. The exhibition was a nice way to think about all of that from a sensorial perspective.

It also explored the role of care in Black, queer, and feminist traditions. Can you talk more about that aspect,

for those who aren't familiar?

One obvious example that I started off with—given that I'm speaking about Black experiences in Berlin—was Audre Lorde, an Afro-Caribbean American poet, writer, lesbian, and feminist. She was diagnosed with cancer in the late-'70s and had to have a mastectomy. At one point, she came to Germany to receive health treatment. During that time, she connected with a number of Afro-German, queer women who were forming collectives and it was in that process of being here and also being in the US—and going back and forth—that she saw care as a revolutionary act. She was going through intense cancer treatment and dealing with depression, but also trying to figure out how to excavate joy, as she was battling to survive.

Care also relates to the works of adrienne marie brown, who, in the book Pleasure Activism, tries to think about it from a place of joy, community, moving the body, and having grassroots organizations that try to dismantle the oppressive regimes that we live in under capitalism. Care is also thinking about Afrofuturism and imagining other possibilities that aren't just about our kind of being down and out. It's not to say that by having care, exercising care, and thinking about joy that you ignore the social realities and material consequences that exist, rather, it gives you the chance to have control over the things that you can control.

You write, research, speak, teach, moderate panels, host a podcast, and work on an array of art projects. How do you manage, or prioritize, all the things that you do?

I don't sleep enough—and I'm working on that. I turn in things later than I intend to. And I'm really hard on myself. That's the honest answer. I wish I could be like, 'It's all perfect. Life is great.' But the reality is that it's difficult. I'm learning that it's important to slow down and work with others. So for one of the books that I'm working on, I'm writing and editing it with a colleague, Dr. Lamia Mognie, who's also a friend. It saves a lot of time to have another person involved and you're like completing each other's sentences.

When I'm writing an article where I'm the sole author, one thing I find difficult is making the time and space that comes with pitching, getting potentially rejected, editing, and going back and forth between other projects. When it comes to research, I'm trying to balance between doing research, conducting interviews, calling people to ask if they want to be interviewed, analyzing the data, ensuring the data is encrypted, applying for funding, and preparing to potentially write about it. It's a lot of back and forth. With academia, I have an expiration date that's coming up soon, so I need to figure out what it means to be associated with an institution versus not, and what it means to have institutional support versus not.

In general, I'm thinking more about how to have the freedom to do what I want. I think as a Black person and as a person who is part of the first generation to go to college in my family, I've seen and been inspired by the hard work of my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles—all of whom didn't have the chance to go to college. So I've always thought, 'I have to work as hard as I can because there's an entire community of people who encouraged me to do this work, who believed in me, and who valued my capacity to grow and learn. Part of the reason why I think I overwork myself is because I think, 'I've got to do it for the ancestors, I've got to do it for my parents.' But I'm learning that it's important to decelerate, especially during the pandemic. I've been saying 'no' to a lot of opportunities and/or passing it on to other Black people. It's been great, and I want to keep doing that because it shouldn't be just one of us on the speed dial, there are a plethora of people who can be doing this work.

Edna Bonhomme Recommends:

Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler

To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe by Akwugo Emjulu and Francesca Sobande

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasii

The Source of Self-Regard by Toni Morrison

Just Us by Claudia Rankine

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Vocation

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