

Stuart Hall Foundation & International Curators Forum present:

Living Archives – Season Two

Episode 3: Rebecca Bellantoni & Gail Lewis

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SPEAKERS

Rebecca Bellantoni, Yewande YoYo Odunubi, Gail Lewis

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 00:10

Hello, my name is Yewande YoYo Odunubi, and welcome to the Living Archive series, co-produced by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum. The Stuart Hall Foundation was established in 2015 by Professor Stuart Hall's family, friends, and colleagues. It's committed to public education, addressing urgent questions of race and inequality in culture and society through talks and events, and building a growing network of Stuart Hall Foundation scholars and artists in residence. International Curators Forum, ICF, is a catalyst and leader for cultural transformation in the visual arts, advocating for, and fostering an equitable, inclusive, and accessible ecology that sustains and is sustained by the value of diversity through high-quality professional development initiatives, as well as critically engaged public programs and discursive outputs. ICF is transforming towards a better world for creative and cultural practitioners by resourcing them with the support spaces and leadership they need. What happens when two artists sit down together to talk? How might their conversation map a living archive of diasporic cultures in Britain? Hosted by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum, Living Archives is a podcast sharing intimate, intergenerational conversations between UK-based diasporic artists. The pairings in each episode begin with an invitation from one artist to another. Together, they exchange insights into art making, memory, and the ideas and influences shaping their practices, rooted in Stuart Hall's vision of a living archive. This series is a record of creative dialogs that explore how histories, identities, and artistic practice are considered in the present. In this third and final episode of the second season of the Living Archive series, Rebecca Bellantoni

and Gail Lewis exchange ideas on home and belonging, the legacy of Black cultural and social movements in pre-2000's Britain, and the ways everyday life shapes their work. Welcome, Rebecca and Gail. Thank you so much for joining us. So, to begin us off, can you take us back to where you first met, or maybe encountered each other's work, but were there any immediate responses either of you had?

Rebecca Bellantoni 02:25

Well, I think the first time I remember seeing Gail's name, actually, was in writing about things that had been happening in the 80's in London, and I was intrigued, but there wasn't really -- your name was always just listed, you know? And then, as time went on, I think the first time that I actually heard you speak was in 2020 during lockdown with the talk with 'Languid Hands' and Michael B. Gillespie, and something you said in that conversation really drew me to what it was that you had to say, and then I was like, "Okay, I'm really now gonna start having to find out who Gail Lewis is," you know? Or as much as I can about your work, and just continued from there; going to lectures and maybe conversations that you might have had with other people, reading your work, and that was my introduction to you.

Gail Lewis 03:18

Oh, that's amazing. That was a really interesting conversation around that film.

Rebecca Bellantoni 03:23

It really was.

Gail Lewis 03:26

So, in fact, I first met Rebecca just in May, or whenever it was, at a screening at the Ritzy of a piece by Ain Bailey, and Orsod [Malik] had contacted me to say, "Would I come be in conversation?", and I thought, "Yeah, this sounds good and everything," but we hadn't met. And then we were both at that event so Rebecca came and said, "Hi, I'm Rebecca", and so that was really nice and I'm starting there because, in a sense, there was a real warmth about you, there was a warmth about you that I was attracted to, so I thought I'm glad I'd said yes. I can't lie; I hadn't seen your work. I knew, for example, that you'd done 'The Roses' at Frieze, because I'd seen and I'd wanted to come to it, and something had gotten in the way that I couldn't couldn't come to it, and I was, sort of, intrigued, really. Was it called 'Compose the Roses'?

Rebecca Bellantoni 04:23

It was called 'Condition The Roses'. 'Condition the Roses, Accept the Vision. C.R.Y'.

Gail Lewis 04:28

That's right. And so, I was intrigued by the title. I had no idea what it meant, "condition the roses." So there was something that was intriguing, and then I got this invitation. It was like, "Oh, okay. The time is now. Spirit's given the time when I should come to know this work and this woman," and so then we

were at that same event. And, of course, now I have seen, you know, a recording of the work and think, “Oh, yeah, there's something really deep in this, deep and opaque, and the opacity is doing some real important work.” That's kind of my introduction.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 05:05

Maybe Rebecca, in following on from that, if you could talk about what have been some of the formative influences in your practice, are there particular ideas, places, movements, or moments that you find yourself returning to?

Rebecca Bellantoni 05:17

Yeah, I think the idea of performance is twofold. I think my first influences, that I didn't always understand, were the women that I grew up with. There is something very performative about Black women, but there's something very performative about working class, Black women. You know, there's an acting out of life, of everyday life, a way of speaking, a way of being, a way of doing that I picked up on, obviously, as a first Black girl, then young Black adolescence, Black woman; which is the one that makes me giggle the most. Like I am, I'm actually a woman. Okay, I'm an adult. You know, it's like that's really funny. But I am. So that's I think my first experiences with performance, and then I think when I went to university, I was introduced to performance in the arts, and never really considered myself as somebody who would do that, because most of the time I was being introduced to it through white women and their bodies, and there was something about it that felt...they were always very slim. They always had very kind of ideal bodies, and something about it just felt -- not always, but the majority of the time, there was something that I didn't feel -- that I could use my body in the same way. I understood that my body wouldn't be telling the same story that those bodies were telling, so I left that alone and kind of focused on objects. But then, once I had graduated and my daughter was born, I had no studio. I had no money to make work. I had really nothing, and then, but still had this innate desire to make work, and that's when performance came into my practice because my body was the only thing I had that I had full access to, and that's how I came to performance. And so, I think that my influences may not be the standard for a performance artist because, in some ways, it started long before the action started. So, yeah, that's how I came to performance. And I think now that I am a performance artist and that I've seen a lot more performance by Black women, by other Black women, I think that, in some ways, I think we're all trying to do the same thing in our own different ways, and that's the thing that I've now found the most beautiful about my own performance practice is that it's in relationship with other people's, you know?

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 07:53

Thank you for sharing that, and I think staying with this question around influences and what you're drawing on, thinking about the piece that you shared, Gail, I think it was a part of 'Black Arsenal'. I'm guessing, the book 'Black Arsenal'? And also, thinking about what you're drawing reference to, and thinking about Rachel Yankey. Am I correct? Yeah, and thinking about who you're looking towards, or who you're drawing reference to, in terms of talking about Black life and aliveness, and thinking about also opacity and what this notion around becoming. Are you able to share a bit more about your influences and -- or just what you're drawing on to think about when you're coming to writing?

Gail Lewis 08:34

Well, it's interesting because when you posed that question to us as something to think about, I thought, "Okay, so I could say, oh well, I'm influenced by these bodies of theoretical works, you know, maybe some artistic works. So, I could say, Audre Lorde and June Jordan and Hortense Spillers and Stuart Hall, you know, Sylvia Wynter," and that's all correct, and we've already referenced Glissant, so, you know, they're all correct, and they all offer something around, kind of, world senses -- not just visions, but senses in all those ways in which we can, kind of, engage the world and engage our sense of ourselves in the world, and our changing sense of our changing self in the world, so all of those things. But then I thought, actually, a bit like, almost a bit like where you started, Rebecca, I think I sent you the piece 'Labours; Smells; Bequests', which is about the household that I grew up in 62 Granville Road, just down the high street here, that was all, apart from my mum, my white mum, everybody else was Black, recent migrants. And that's a tribute to them, to those women and men in that household, who, I mean, as a child you kind of know because you're cared for. You know all the stuff about like, the physical caring for my little girl, Black body happened through the Black women in the household. There was mum, but there was also, you know, how to cream herself, how to do my hair. I'm still learning how to do that, but they tried to teach me, you know, all of those things, which is about practices of self-care that come from...we don't think about it, but all the kind of knowledges that are embedded in our cultural histories. So there was that, but there was a way in which now, if I anchor those into the languages offered by some of those people, for example, that I've, you know -- the theorists can think about what they showed was that even under siege, and our household was under siege, it did get a petrol thing thrown into it at the time of the Notting Hill riots because we weren't that far away, so we were under siege. But actually, Black life goes on living, reaching for itself, living for itself in a way that can't be accounted for by the logics of accounting of sociology, geography, history, anthropology, English literatures, all of those things. And so, it's now in my old age, in a sense, that I realise they were the founding stones of my influence. They were the things that I realised, I have a

language for now and an effective capacity for now. So, I'm reaching towards what they put me on the trail of. And I've heard that in your work, when I've heard your work now, and what you just said, I see that we share something there.

Rebecca Bellantoni 11:42

Most definitely. I mean, I think the theory, the theory came...what feels so late in life, you know, it's like the foundation was already set by the time I came to the theory. And what it allowed me to do was to understand that I wasn't alone in some of the experiences that I was having, because I think what I often experienced was that something would happen, and I'd look around at my community, and I'd feel like I was everybody else would just be like, "La la la, like, okay," and I would be like, "Hold on, did nobody just notice that this thing has happened, or what are we going to do about this thing? Are we just going to gossip about it and not do anything?". And that, I think when I came to the theory, I realised that there were other people who were coming from similar spaces to my own, who were, if they had been in the space with me, we would have caught eyes and understood what was going on in that situation, you know? And I think that's what theory was for me. But I really, I would be definitely doing a disservice to myself, my practice, and the people that raised me if I, if I said that those were my influences, because actually, they were, you know, if my community and the people I grew up with are the kind of foundation, then the theory is, in some way, the kinds of bricks of the house that I've been trying to build for myself since then, you know? Yeah.

Gail Lewis 13:10

And I just want to come back because you mentioned the 'Black Arsenal' piece, and I talked in that about Rachel Yankey, who I never saw play, and why I needed to put her in there, apart from the fact that that team won the quadruple. I mean, it's only about can Arsenal, the men's team, win the double? Which they've done many times. But can they win the Champions League and everything? But those women won everything before in that year, and Rachel Yankey was so central to that, and why she's in there is because, in a sense, it's a kind of bringing-to-surface the ways in which Black women become invisible all the time, and yet are foundational to so much that is achievement, but isn't just achievement. It is the practice of doing and being that leads to achievement, in a sense. So, I was kind of correcting myself, you know, because I go to the men's games mostly, yeah. But here's this figure, this woman, who went through everything to enable her to become a professional footballer, disguised herself as a boy so she could go to training because she was not able to -- wasn't going to stop her. This thing called girlhood was not going to stop her, and she muddled something. So it's about, we must

call into surface those of us who -- we complain others forget, but I can forget too, in that way. So, that's also why I think it was important in the testimony to being Black, being...yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 14:49

I guess that that is important. Again, it kind of connects with Glissant's opacity. You know, there are things that have gone before that we can learn from, you know, like the opacity of pretending to be something different than what you are in order to get forward, you know, or the school rings and you say, "Oh, good afternoon," you speak in a slightly different way, or my grandmother used to do that. You know, there's all of these things that you can do, and that we might sometimes want to step away from them a little bit gruesome sometimes, you know, to see people doing these things. Like, I remember my granddad answering the phone once and saying, "Oh, y'alright, mate?", and I'd never heard my granddad say "mate" before in my life. Like, never had I heard my granddad say "mate", you know? And it was like, it really shook me. But then I understood. You know, you slowly start to understand what it is that this person's doing and why they're doing it, and what at first seems grotesque is actually...it's opacity. He didn't choose to show himself to those people, you know? And some people would say, you know, that's respectability politics and assimilation, and I guess that that comes into it. But I think it's actually a lot deeper than that. You know, that we can allow ourselves to see the deepness of that kind of behaviour, you know? Speaking about Stuart Hall and what is it that influenced you, what inspired you, and I think his Reception theory is very important and connected to what we're speaking about. You know, he's speaking about the audience and what you can give to the audience is not necessarily what they're going to get from what you're giving, and I think that those two are connected. You know, it's like there's a kind of a genius in a way to actually understand what the audience is going to get from who you are, based on who the audience is. You know, I think that that's why, like somebody like my granddad would say "mate" in that conversation because, actually, he did understand that without that, he wouldn't be understood, accepted, involved, work. So, it's like whenever we think about these social ways of being, about these creative ways of being, and about my practice, your practice of writing and thinking, that there's always something that's considered the kind of lower level that is the starting point for that thinking, you know? That's a very important thing for me to remember. And I think my everyday life, in a way, stops me from forgetting because I have what, I don't know, is it a middle class pursuit to want to be an artist, to want to be a creative? Is that a middle class thing and above middle class? When I am a working class person and remain a working class person despite being this thing, I have this kind of knowing, you know? Again, this kind of understanding this -- I don't want to call myself a genius. I'm not calling myself a genius, but this genius that is amongst us, you know? That's there all of the time. I like to think about that.

Gail Lewis 18:15

So, are you saying about genius that it's a sort of resource that's there amongst that, that we can tap into and draw on?

Rebecca Bellantoni 18:25

Yes, I think it's a kind of...you know, like what is culture? Culture is something that we do that we are able to pass on, you know? And I think that, that thing that I'm talking about is something that we very rarely speak about as something that we have developed. We've developed it, you know? And we had to develop it outside of our original spaces.

Gail Lewis 18:51

Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 18:52

And I am second generation in this country. My grandparents came in the early 50's, and there's something that they learnt that they've passed down that was never really spoken about. Like, how did that happen? You know, how has that happened? And that's what I'm really interested in. There's the way that this kind of genius is an energetic thing rather than a -- there's no guidebook. You don't get the guidebook, you know?

Gail Lewis 19:26

Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 19:27

But we all know it. How do we know this thing?

Gail Lewis 19:31

And it reminds me of something that you said in one of the conversations that you had about how, in your approach to work, it's not like how does...it's the energetic. You talked about the energetic, energetical energy in something that that's the thing that animates and drives you and tells you kind of -- you talked about how you don't decide, "Oh, I'm going to use this material." What you're going to make tells you, the world tells you what the material should be, and there's something about that

tapping. I was thinking about tapping in, in that way, but that requires a kind of listening and an attunement to more than just say a voice or a sound, but an energy to it.

Rebecca Bellantoni 20:17

I think it does, you know, I was reading one of the texts that you wrote for the 'Loophole of Retreat'.

Gail Lewis 20:24

Oh yeah, that's the 'Labour; Smiles; Bequest' one, yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 20:26

And then, in this bit you say, "The right to the city is not merely a right" -- it's not your quote, you are quoting it, and you say, "The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire," and I think that that comes into play, you know?

Gail Lewis 20:45

And it's so, just so clear that it requires so much more than an idea of intelligence. But some -- attunement is the word that comes to me, in a sense. But through all the senses, and an openness to the vulnerability of that, too.

Gail Lewis 21:07

The vulnerability and the charge. You're then charged with something. I think if you -- if it sounds with you, then you're being told that your work involves this.

Rebecca Bellantoni 21:18

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 21:18

And what I find in terms of writing, because I hate writing, actually. I find it such a torture, an absolute torture. And I know everybody can say everybody finds writing a torture, and I think that's right. But I know my one is...it's a torture because I always know that it's never enough that things called words on a page -- I often write with pencil, actually, I start writing with pencil. I like pencil better, but certainly pen. And then I only then copy myself into you know scribing. I need something. I need something about the physical embodiment and the sound. Look, the sound. Yeah. But it's never, ever -- the words I have anyway, are never going to be enough to even really approximate towards what I'm trying to

garner. What I'm feeling is being, you know, my job, as it were, to say this thought or this idea or something. But with what words? It's too limited. So, the writing process is such a torture for me, and I often wonder what I need. Which is why I sometimes might use recorded music or a sound, because it will give the affective energy that needs to be linked to this idea or this word or something like that.

Rebecca Bellantoni 22:44

You know, that arrogance that I once had when I was younger, especially when I was at university, I didn't, I didn't have much of a kind of artistic base. So, I was at university struggling amongst, you know, my peers, who were my peers in one way and not in another, and I thought that there were so many things that I was facing and that I was thinking about, that I was the first to do so, which is so embarrassing. But I did. There was like -- I really did, you know? And the understanding when you come to realise that you're not the first, and because you're not the first, it's okay, you know? That really resonates with me. It's understandable that it wouldn't be easy to write because I think that often what I have read of your writing, that there's a lot of kind of -- if you know, if you have the experiences, if you recognize your own life, it can be quite painful.

Gail Lewis 23:43

Yeah, I think that's true.

Rebecca Bellantoni 23:41

There's like, there's a lot of unspoken pain I think in the things that you're saying.

Rebecca Bellantoni 23:46

In a way, it's that kind of thing where, you know, what happens in the house stays in the house. I can feel in your writing this kind of, again, wanting to expose it, but there's still some opacity. Again, there's some things that you don't say, but depending on who's coming across the writing will know.

Gail Lewis 24:07

Yeah, and in a way, that's right. That's kind of the product of the limits, as it were, kind of conscious and unconscious limits. But it's also about trying to offer something that says, "Well, here's some thoughts. I'm not making some claim that they are the truth and you must fit yourself into them," but is there some vibration in you that says, "Oh yeah, maybe my thought overlaps in this way, but not quite there, you know, in different configurations, and that together we begin to pattern something that speaks to our collective story, kind of unthought visions"?. You know, we don't quite know the shape of them, but we

know we have them. Those things toward which we want to go. By picking up what came before, that we can only sense. So, it's about trying to write in a way that's open like that, in the sense of an invitation to engage in that way. Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 25:13

I think in my practice, I've got this methodology that is called 'C.R.Y', which breaks down to Concrete Regenerative Yearnings, and though I think what you're saying -- it kind of marries with that. It's like, we definitely want this regeneration, but we're yearning for it, you know?

Rebecca Bellantoni 25:31

It's like we keep on going for it. We find new ways. We become experimental. We go back to the past. We develop. We take things away. We add things, but always yearning, you know? I just remember when I was growing up, you know, going to Saturday school that had been set up by some women in my community for the children. You know, they were seeing that a lot of us were failing, despite the fact that we were, you know, bright, intelligent people. And I remember, even at that time, I don't know why I was like this, but I just was. I just could see, like, how much passion was in what they were doing, and often trying to teach us things that they themselves didn't really understand, but knew that we needed to understand, you know? That yearning, that desire to keep on going, and to really keep on going, you know, not just to think about it, to actually do it, even when you don't know exactly what it is that you're doing, I think.

Gail Lewis 26:30

And that just reminds me of saying about the Saturday school you went to and, of course, the whole Saturday school movement was full of passion.

Rebecca Bellantoni 26:37

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 26:38

Social movements are full of passion, because they're about life, you know? They're saying, "You want to crush us down, or you want to treat our children...that we will, we absolutely refuse it," but because of a passion, not because of something called 'proper parenting', you know? In some sense, but because of a passion, because we're not letting the children go, because we're not letting ourselves go

either, since they are our inheritors. And so, that vibrant life form of life that is about survival and beyond survival. You know, it's about transformation, really. Saying, "We will be here."

Rebecca Bellantoni 27:19

Yeah, you know, I was raised amongst mostly Rastas, actually. So, it's like there's this kind of militance that was attached to that. That I am so grateful that I had, even though it was like the militance is against -- not necessarily against, it's not innate in me. It's not the way that I...I've come to understand that I'm more gentle. There's something more tender about myself that I, at some point, kind of put away because I was being raised in amongst this kind of militance.

Gail Lewis 27:52

Right.

Rebecca Bellantoni 27:53

And there's an understanding that I had to come to later, and that I think I'm now finding out is that passion doesn't equate militancy, you know?

Gail Lewis 28:03

No, no, no.

Rebecca Bellantoni 28:05

But I, I didn't -- myself, personally, that wasn't really something I understood. So, there were times when I sat back and didn't do anything because I didn't want to do something -- and I'm not saying something not radical, I'm saying militant, you know? It's like, radical I think can encompass all sorts of behaviors, whereas militancy requires a certain type of thing that I don't have innately.

Gail Lewis 28:31

You know, think about the militant, if you like, if militant means a kind of strident, clear, you know...of a woman called Rebecca, a Black woman called Rebecca, showing her gentleness -- in every way in which you're known in the world, is you can only be angry, you can only be aggressive, you can only be frightening, you know? All that stuff because as a Black woman, that's how you know. And you're coming and you're in the work, in your voice, your presentation of self. That's what I said to you, the warmth when I just met you in the Ritzy. That's already a radical disturbance.

Rebecca Bellantoni 29:16

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 29:17

If radical means root, you know, disturbance of everything that this country and these countries would understand you to be...

Rebecca Bellantoni 29:26

Yeah, yeah.

Gail Lewis 29:27

It's in your personhood.

Rebecca Bellantoni 29:31

I do think it's like, you know, in many conversations with my closest people, I think that is something that I have understood. I'm always saying to them, "Stay yourself, like, stay your sweet self, like stay your sweet self," because I think that is the thing that this place tries to take out of you. So, that in some ways you maybe, you know, there's definitely such a thing as righteous anger, for sure...and I am -- I have partaken in that myself, you know? So I have, definitely, but I think that we can get to a point where you forget that you were something else before, you know? I think in my work, those are the things that I'm speaking about. You know, in one way, it's why I'm going back to that, going back to that point so often, and that point, being the, kind of, the 80's when I was growing up, and when I was engaging with all of these things that were being organised for me because I was a child, I was just being taken and watching and loving and you know thinking, "Oh, that's not done well," and thinking, "Wow, this is amazing," you know? Like, why have you done it like that? You know, all of these things, I was thinking I just -- now I understand what was happening. You know, and how difficult it was for those people, for those women that were raising all of us, the community's children, to keep their tenderness while they were being radical.

Gail Lewis 30:57

Yeah. Exactly, exactly, exactly.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 31:01

Like, listening to you both, one of the things that I was struck by, I think, going back to something you were saying around listening and listening in, and I think both of your work really invites an audience to listen in, but also we see how you're listening in as artists, as writers, as practitioners, there's something in the sonic that I feel in both of your work, like, quite readily, which I think is really important. And I know, Gail, you were talking about feeling a difficulty around writing because, you know, it's not the only methodology or method that can be employed to kind of hold the things that you're talking about, but there's so much sonic in your writing that comes through this notion around repetition that I also see in your work, Rebecca. And I think there's something that is picked up in the 'Black Arsenal', if you don't mind me reading, where it says, "In repetition, an uncanny space is conjured, as if we are all lifted into and suspended in a perpetual now. This is both anxiety-producing and thrilling." And I think in this idea of repetition, you get echoing, you get sonic, and kind of maybe bringing in what you're saying, Rebecca, around how you're engaging with this Rastafarian, like, upbringing around militancy, but employing kind of your own methodology around this radicalness in these refrains of Jah Rastafari, breathe. I mean, open, open up. I think you're sounding out this energy, and I feel that also energetically when you're saying in this, "I never saw you play live," like, and you're repeating these refrains, and I just wondered if you both wouldn't mind touching around what repetition does for you in your practice sonically, but also it could be performatively, what it maybe does for you as a practitioner in reading those words or saying those out loud?

Gail Lewis 32:58

I mean, I almost always write to music playing. I might have the TV on as well, I must admit, just because I need, you know...football or tennis or something, I just need to get -- but I have music on because it kind of taps into...I guess it taps into parts of me that aren't just head and can, kind of get me going as well. Without knowing the what, without being able to -- it's all a bit inchoate. It kind of frees me up into just free-flowing thinking, letting ideas just go. You know, that kind of stuff. So, there's something about that that maybe gets captured. You know, represented...just because there is music going on, and obviously that question of repetition as a refrain, both in terms of like in music -- the music I like...I mean, I was brought up on jazz, you know, that's what blasted out of our room in that house in Granville Road upstairs, it was all kinds of different, you know, all up to the top when it was church, but spiritual church, you know, syncretised church and stuff. So, the music, but I was brought up on jazz, but obviously became a teenager at the time of, you know, rocksteady, ska; you know, all that kind of stuff was going on. So, there's something about the way in which all of those music carry a kind of repetition, and the music, the classical music I now have come to love, which is European

Baroque, Bach, and those people, the ways in which they do repetitions, but also counterpoints and stuff, which happens. So, there's something about the ways in which the notes, all of the musical notes, where something is produced in repetition, but in the gaps between sound and silence...and it's in the gap where we come to feel what's being conveyed, in a sense. So, all of that informs how I think. That's what writing should be. That's what my wordscribing should be, kind of thing, so there's that. But repetition is also a way in which you both...you do two things with it. In the repeating, you, kind of, make space and declare presence, think about the political chant and constantly repeat it. When we're making space, we're declaring presence. We're making a claim. We're doing an analysis, too, because they carry an analysis. So, there's something about that -- that repetition of we're not going, we're not going. Our presence is still here. It might not be me, but it will be the next generation that's following us, and they will repeat and repeat. So, there's that. But there's also the ways in which there's variations out of repetition, because they're never really, actually, a repeat. They're much more like a spiral turn. So, there's something about moving around a core idea, but they actually are not -- they never quite come back to the same place. I think repetition both can conjure both the repeat, in that sense, but it can also conjure the variation that speaks to...well, we're speaking, say, for example, in terms of Blackness and Blackness as otherwise, to conjure Saidiya Hartman in that way, and Blackness as modes of living that are in the interstices, are outside of capture, that refuse capture, even while we are captured in those interstices, and that repetition can take us back into the interstices, where we produce ourselves outside of the logics of normalisation and normativity, and make the declaration in, "We are here because you were there." Say, one old slogan, or the repetition of the trumpet of Don Cherry as he spirals into something, or the repetition of Nina Simone singing 'Sinnerman', you know, or something. You know, all of those moments that are captured, that feel really important as a mode of, well, a mode of life, but actually central to the ongoing in-process making of Blacknesses. I think that's where your question took me.

Gail Lewis 37:28

I mean, there was one thing that was in my head about, like, a repetition, but it's not really repetition. If you think about the ways in which John Coltrane and Miles Davis did 'My Favourite Things'. Okay, so here we hear a complete disruption of 'The Sound of Music', and then we get Lauryn Hill doing 'Favourite Things', but "Black rage is found in on two-thirds a person, rapings and beatings and suffering that worsens." Now there's a repetition, but we're the difference.

Rebecca Bellantoni 38:17

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 38:18

So, like in the ways in which Black musicians have modeled for us something about -- there's repetitions and there's variations of them because they're all in the service of Black life otherwise, really...so, I think that that's kind of what was playing in my head as much as anything.

Rebecca Bellantoni 38:37

While you were singing, I was just thinking about the version of 'Woman's Work', Kate Bush's one, and Maxwell's version of 'Woman's Work', and the difference between them.

Gail Lewis 38:46

Oh, yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 38:47

It's like this, kind of, a pathos, like a kind of...something else that gets something else. You know, something else.

Gail Lewis 38:57

A something else, and Cannonball Adderley has an album called 'Something Else' from the 60's, you know. So, I mean, it's all there, you know. Like...

Rebecca Bellantoni 39:05

I wanted to ask you, Gail, because really -- me being really interested in the idea of location and geography and what comes from location, I'm really intrigued as to how, as a working class person living in Kilburn, how you found yourself where you are now. I know it's a very big question, but I wonder what the starting steps were, and who it was that, kind of, held your hand on the first steps, you know? I think I like to ask these questions because I think there are people there, you know, who want to follow. Who maybe don't even know that they, you know -- the most intriguing thing is, is that when you come from a certain place, it doesn't matter how many have gone before, you don't know.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 39:56

Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 39:57

Because, like the work, the work of the mind and the work of the body and the financial things that come from those things, often take you out. You know, you're actually trying to work yourself out of that place, and by working yourself out of that place, you also often can work yourself away from the community that you then spend your your time speaking about, you know, because you are part of that community, but I'm wondering how you...what was it and who was it and who were you? But, you know, who was the little girl in Kilburn?

Gail Lewis 40:33

Oh, who was the little girl in Kilburn? The very...me and my...because it wasn't really my cousin or my brother, but he was my brother and my cousin. He was born, not a Black guy, he was born one week after me. Our mums, both white mums, you know, were in this mother-and-baby home up in Walthamstow, and they sort of became friends because they were both having Black children, really, and stuff. And they were treated in a particular kind of way, but so, Ray, he passed some years ago now, but we used to run around. He was in Harlesden and I was in Kilburn Park, we used to run around all these -- just playing. So there was -- that was Gail, and Gail was also frightened, really, a lot of the time. I mean, we were always told, "Be careful, the Teddy Boys," and then, "Don't go down this bit of the road," and "Don't go that way," and "Only wait till we come and get you from such and such place -- you know, parents or somebody comes and picks you up." So, it was very patchwork, in terms of where we could move as Black kids, and we didn't see very many Black kids at that point here. I want to read, say that somebody used, and I saw I have a thing of it that I...I wrote in -- or it was a conversation in this book called 'Revolutionary Feminisms'. That's a book. And so, I say in that, "As I was explaining to my analyst throughout my adult life, I felt impelled to understand the world through lots of political and analytical frameworks. I felt I really need to understand Marxism, imperialism, and anti-imperialism, feminism, post-structuralism, and all of these things right across the board. But everything I've done to try and grasp this complexity, and every framework I've tried to think through, in the end, it's all because I've been trying to understand my mum, so that's why I don't know how to begin." So, that kind of seems apposite there, and I think in a sense that is -- the mum is my mum, and the complexities of race and gender dynamics...but it's also my mother's, my foremothers, the Black women as well. Okay, so a white birth mother, but a Black woman, trying to understand their locations in the world, but the locations that they produce for themselves by moving in the world in unexpected ways. So, I think that's absolutely been central to what I now -- in a sense, it's retrospectively because you look back on life -- now understand it as being the path I've been on. But where it came to having some familiarity with these bodies of theory and their languages, being able to think about how they applied to everyday life.

Because in the end, that's what I'm interested in, everyday life, and all the things that frame it and make it and deprive it, but all the ways in which everyday life shows radical, in minuscule ways, refusal of that, and offer something else, and where I got to this -- being able to use these bodies of literature really and ways of thinking, is absolutely, only through politics. Being involved in Black political organisations to some extent at first, kind of bit fleetingly in and out, feeling a bit shy, nervous, you know, with the BLF and the Black Team Freedom Party, just from, kind of, traveling a bit around them. But those...and then obviously the Brixton Black Women's Group, even before. But those ones that preceded me being in the Brixton Black Women's Group from 1978 was, you know, was a requirement to read. Organisations said, "We need to...if we're going to liberate our minds. We need to read, and people, you know, activists, provinces, are producing literature. So we need to read." So, we had to read Fanon.

Rebecca Bellantoni 44:37

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 44:37

You know, I didn't understand a word of it at one level, but we had to read it, and so you knew that there were other ways of thinking to engage the world differently, and that kind of stuff. So, then I would go...you know, it was a 1968 kind of thing. So I'm 17, you know, by then living out in the bloody suburbs but going into Tottenham and Brixton and West Indian Student Centre, not being a student at all, I worked in a factory. You know, I did all this...but knowing that somewhere there were these resources, you know, this genius was there, that if I could just find a way in myself to reach into it, I could learn something, and I could understand these mothers, as it were.

Rebecca Bellantoni 45:25

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 45:26

But it was politics, and then you have to read, and then you get a little bit more confidence of trying to read, because together sisters are saying, "Well, maybe it means this," and "I think it means that," and you know, you begin to build the literacy, and you're being an activist, too. So, it's translating that theory into, "Oh, this action now," or "This claim --" as feminists, we were saying, "Claim against the state for a local nursery for Black and other women to put their kids while they go to work." You know, that kind of -- you know, you begin to understand what's meant by 'the state'. Yeah, because it's translating into

everyday political actions that are linked to everyday needs of people, so that's really where it came from. So it's politics, really.

Rebecca Bellantoni 46:09

Yeah, yeah. I was thinking that, like, for me, I think, like I've just told you, you know, before, like how I was raised to a certain extent, but then there was a fracture within my childhood, and I think the fracture mirrored what also happened in the community, which is drugs...first of all, came in. There was also a kind of...there were also people making the decision if they were going to continue being political in their everyday life, or if they were going to go and get a job and try to buy a house and do the things that their parents were really desperate that they would do; the things that their parents had actually come to this country for. So, my community fractured, and then I found myself -- I actually put myself into care, and went into -- I did, yeah, I had to. I felt like it was the best thing for me, you know? And luckily enough, it was the best thing for me. I was put with a very, very fantastic woman, and in her house, she had a library, and for me, that was the thing that changed me. You know, I was 13 when I read 'Song of Solomon' by Toni Morrison, 13. You know, my daughter's now 13, and I'm thinking, "Wow, wow," you know?

Gail Lewis 47:25

Yes, and reimagining yourself doing that.

Rebecca Bellantoni 47:29

Yeah, you know? And it changed my life. Like it genuinely changed my life to read this beauty, you know? It was so beautiful while talking about some of the worst things possible, you know, and I think that that was the thing that made me. I just, okay, was like, "Oh, okay, that I can read, I can read, I can read," you know? "I can read, and I'm gonna find myself in all of these different places." And I think in my practice, what I'm striving for is what Toni Morrison achieved, which is, you know, really, in some ways a kind of ridiculous thing to reach for because it is so amazing, you know? But her ability to kind of take the everyday and to expose the magic of it.

Gail Lewis 48:14

Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 48:15

And I also feel really grateful that that was the first book that I read because in that book is the character pilot.

Gail Lewis 48:21

Yes.

Rebecca Bellantoni 48:22

And there is another example of a woman who just lives how she wants to, you know, and allows the other women around her to live how they want to, with her guidance, but not with...but also with understanding when they kind of veer away from what she might have done in the situation.

Gail Lewis 48:39

You sort of see the intergenerational fault lines.

Rebecca Bellantoni 48:42

Yes, exactly, and how it ends up, and I think... so, in some ways, it was, kind of, again another series of women and their way of living, their way of being, whether it's through my foster mother or whether it's through Toni Morrison and her writing about the everyday. That gave me the kind of spark that the everyday could be something bigger or different, maybe, than what I originally thought it was, you know?

Gail Lewis 49:10

And I know in terms of my own work, when I was at the Open University, I worked in Social Policy, so we were kind of social and cultural analysts of social policy, really. You know, we were all informed by Stuart Hall's work, and we knew that culture as an analytical lens was really important. So we did that, and we did very collective work. So, that was amazing. We worked in course teams to produce the course materials for the students and stuff like that. I mean, really in teams.

Rebecca Bellantoni 49:41

That's amazing, by the way.

Gail Lewis 49:42

It was, it was extraordinary.

Rebecca Bellantoni 49:42

It really is, for an Open University, I know has changed many many people's lives. You know, many that I know and grew up.

Gail Lewis 49:50

Absolutely, but I don't think it -- I don't think they work like that now.

Rebecca Bellantoni 49:54

No.

Gail Lewis 49:54

But we used stuff -- that work...you know, really, and everything went through several drafts, and so, they were from D-Zero to handover, so 0-1-2-3, handover; put by the course team with all these comments back and stuff. So, it was -- you were a scribe, and you were gathering up collective minds, you know, that kind of stuff. So you were doing work, and so we all produced some amazing stuff, and it was a 'we' that produced the work. Whatever names are on thing, it was a 'we'. But then there came a point, as well, where I just thought, "But where are the people?". Especially when it came into the high theory of poststructuralism. I thought, "Hang on a bit. At least Marx in capital has got Mr. Moneybags, you know, as the capital." You know, there's a figure called Mr. Moneybags. There's something about a person, you know, like and all that kind of stuff, and with the worker and stuff like that. But where have the people gone? And so, in the end, I just thought, "I've got to go to experience. I've got to go to something called 'experience' as an analytical category," but to take us into, what do people say about living their lives? And what theories are they giving us? To understand that. So, I went to this category of 'experience' and trying to understand experience as the font, really, to help us think the conjuncture on the contingent, if we think with Stuart Hall's things or reception, for you, in terms of audiences and stuff...but the person sitting in the audience, or the people then sitting in the audience, you know, the people living, you know, in housing when it's all being sold off by Thatcher, stuff like that, you know, and they think that, "This is the opportunity," or "I can buy my own home" and all that, and the consequences of that, the living of the castle state, you know, all of those things. So, I moved to 'experience' to get closer up to people on the page, as it were. I was recently in Accra, and I've never been to West Africa before. You know, lots of things happened on that trip there, but one of the ones was to go to Cape Castle and the slave dungeons. And almost as soon as I arrived in Accra, but certainly by going into the slave dungeons, which I found really, really hard...was I kept saying, "I'm now in the breach in another way, I know the breach now in another kind of way and that breach can't

be breached.” If you know what I mean, like, you know, these English words have this double meaning, sometimes that are the complete opposite. So, “the breach can’t be breached,” and so I’m experiencing the breach from a third point in the triangle that I’ve not been to before, and I know we cannot ever return. I can feel, I can imagine, I can see, but I can’t really know.

Rebecca Bellantoni 53:00

Yeah.

Gail Lewis 53:01

And that’s left me with the whole set of unresolved things to think about, and feel about, and all that kind of stuff. But then watching again afterwards, and I watched again, that I thought, “Oh, but here’s another kind of returning-to-a-root that does something different, and I don’t know what the relationship between those things are, and maybe, maybe, it is something about the diasporic remakings of practices of return? I don’t know.

Rebecca Bellantoni 53:34

Yeah, I mean, I think, like, that pleases me no end, to what you’re saying because I think that all of what you said is exactly what I’m trying to speak about inside of it, to really speak about. Because, like I was saying earlier, that I was given this vision, and inside of the vision, it’s very difficult to explain certain things because everything happens all at once, you know? And how do you explain something? So many ideas come into a mind at once. But while I was given that vision, I also then started to think about, “Well, we’re here, like, we’re here, that we are here. There is no going back. We cannot go back. This concrete is where we are. It’s what we’ve been given,” and if you don’t have the ability to just get up and leave and go somewhere, which you believe to be home, and I’m talking about it as somebody who’s from the Caribbean diaspora, so already one step away...

Gail Lewis 54:33

Exactly.

Rebecca Bellantoni 54:34

...from home, you know. Okay, so then, what do we do here? How do I understand and come to...I’m here, like I literally was born in Paddington Hospital, St Mary’s Hospital. I was born here. I was created here, and while being created here, my destiny, my purpose, everything is involved in this city, and I’m so desperate, and I still kind of -- maybe don’t feel as desperate as I did at that time, but just desperate

to figure out how do we accept that we are here and bring what's gone before, back to us here? You know, it's like in my practice, I often like -- if you look up here, there's on that shelf, there's some of those carved heads.

Gail Lewis 55:22

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 55:24

And a lot of those heads are carved for tourist needs. They actually don't hold the spiritual power in the way that some people might, at first, assume. And I've chosen...I really started to buy those and use those in my work as a kind of way of speaking about the fact that, you know -- like you might know something, but there are other things that you don't know, you know? It's like it's impossible to go back. You just can't, and it's like in some ways it makes me feel really emotional because I understand that there's so many things that I'll never know about myself. Like for example, my name. You know, I don't actually know what would my name be. But then at the same time, what I do know is here.

Gail Lewis 56:10

Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 56:10

I really know this place. Like, I know this place. I know it for better, I know it for worse. And I think a lot of us do. Like, this really is home. And if we choose to kind of create children and raise them, we're doing exactly what was done before. So, we have to find, to recognise the foundation that exists here, you know? It seems to become more and more -- especially nowadays when people are starting to talk. Look at, you know, we're not even meant to be here, as far as many people are concerned, and they're actually really starting to try to walk towards that path, you know? So then, it becomes even more important to find some kind of..it's not about solace. It's not about feeling good. It's about understanding a belonging, like finding a true belonging to the place, to the space, in order to make it into a place, you know? Exactly.

Speaker 2 57:06

Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 57:07

And I think it's like, when I was reading about -- in your work, location is so important. I find it's, like, it might not be the thing that you think to focus on, but you know, you're meeting with Sarah Reed. I think it was in King's Cross? Yeah,

Gail Lewis 57:21

Yeah, location does matter to me. Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 57:25

It's like, you just start to see things differently. It's like when I went to King's Cross the other day on Sunday with my sister, and I've never been able to not think about the fire of King's Cross whenever I go in there. That's impossible for me. I just cannot. For me, King's Cross is ablaze still, but now it's also something else. You know, now I can see the strength and the wonder of Sarah Reed, the person who, while asking for help, also was claiming her own autonomy. You know, like saying, "I am who I am."

Gail Lewis 57:59

Absolutely, an enlivening force, actually.

Rebecca Bellantoni 58:04

Yes, the energy is there now and that's my point. And that's, okay -- so, now I can explain what the Institute of C.R.Y is: it's about that. It's about noting those experiences so that we can know that the energy is there. Do you know what I mean?

Gail Lewis 58:22

I do, I do. Yeah, really. Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 58:24

I think that's the thing that I was trying to explain with everything that I've said so far. It's like, "What is it that I'm doing?", you know, it's not about archiving. It's about knowing.

Gail Lewis 58:33

Yeah.

Rebecca Bellantoni 58:33

Something different.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 58:34

Thank you for listening to the third and final episode of this second season of the Living Archive series. Living Archives was brought to you by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum, with funding from Arts Council England, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Hollick Family Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and the Power of Pop Fund. Be sure to follow the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum on social media and subscribe to their newsletters to be amongst the first to hear about upcoming events, residencies, scholarship opportunities, and professional development and public programs from both organisations. Thank you all for tuning in, for sharing news of the series with your networks, and for supporting this important project. On behalf of the Stewart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of the contributors this season: Niki Kohandel and Alia Sayed, Ain Bailey and Ebun Sodipo, and today's guests Rebecca Bellantoni and Gail Lewis for making the time to speak with me, share their critical insights, and for generously sharing their work reflections and observations with us all. Thank you again for listening.