



# Black women making history

BY SARAH HENRY

2023 marks the 37th Black History Month in Britain. Each October people have the opportunity to celebrate and value black historical figures and events that have shaped Britain and the world.

At the intersection of being black and a woman is the area of discrimination recently defined as misogynoir. Black women have historically had the two aspects of discrimination to work against. Despite these obstacles, black women have and will continue to make beautiful and inspiring history. Every historical event and every role model dismantles and fights the misogynoir that tries to hold us back.

Each black woman who has made history deserves the recognition, credit and respect that is given to her. She earned it. As the first woman to secure an EGOT (An Emmy, a Grammy, an Oscar and a Tony) in 2002, Whoopi Goldberg earned it. Dame Linda Dobbs was the first black woman to become a high court judge in the UK in 2004. Dame Linda earned it. But there is more history than that which is earned, there is that which is lived.

Every black woman has black women in her personal history. Beyond the historical figures and celebrities are the mothers. I come from a long line of black mothers of black daughters. Each of us have lived through landmark historical events that have threatened us, challenged us, inspired us or celebrated us. Through all of this, each of us remained resilient, strong and hopeful.

In considering Black women making history although I explored the long list of well-known and incredibly inspiring historical black women, I came back to my first thought: the women in my history, the events we've lived through and the hope for our daughters. We are the daughters.



## FLORENCE (1905 – 1992)

Lorita became a mother to my great-grandma Florence in May 1905 and died in 1910. Lorita had so few sources for external inspiration in her few years as Florence's mother; her faith and maybe her own mother. Her daughter was born into a Jamaica that was in the tight grasp of Britain's rule. I have no idea

if she knew about inspiring black women such as Emma Gurley in America in 1906. Emma was doing all she could with her husband to build up a whole community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for black people to thrive and prosper in a hostile USA. In fact, Florence was born only 9 years before Viola Fletcher, the oldest known living survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921 which destroyed that very same neighbourhood.



## SALOME (1934 – 2017)

Florence became the mother of my grandma, Salome in Jamaica in 1934. This was exactly one century after The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which formally ended slavery in Jamaica in 1834. Paradoxically 100 years seems like so much and so little time all at once. Salome was born before a black woman had won an Oscar. Hattie McDaniel was

the first black woman to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in 1939. Still so much history to see, still so many possibilities.

Florence didn't know that her daughter would make history for us, as the first woman in our family to move from Jamaica, a British colony, and have the right to settle in Britain with entitlements of British citizenship thanks to The Nationality Act 1948



## MALVIA (1964 - )

Salome, my grandma had my mother in September 1964. Malvia was the first British born woman in our history. It's likely that my grandma saw the photos of Ruby Bridges surrounded by marshals in 1960. As the first black child to attend the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans the photo represents an undeniable

shift for the rights of black people in the west.

In Britain The Race Relations Act was the first legislation to outlaw racial discrimination in Britain. That was 1965. My own mother was the last one of us to be born while racism was still legal in Britain. Of course, this didn't





eradicate racism, but I wonder how much hope my grandma felt for her daughter as this moment in history came to pass.



### SARAH (1988 - )

My own mother became a mother in February 1988 when I was born. I was born into a world where it was possible for a black woman to be a member of the British parliament. Diane Abbott was the first to achieve this only the year before in 1987. Black British women were achieving Olympic gold medals (Tessa Sanderson was the first in 1984). It's

not that my mother wanted me to be a politician or an athlete, it's that for the first time in history, she could see that it was possible for her daughter.

The world has such a long way to go before the achieve the equality we deserve or the equity we need to get there. I'm proud I'm living out a dream of us all and training, writing and advocating for racial equality and justice.



### FREYA (2009 - )

I became a mother to my daughter Freya in May 2009. She was born into a world where there was a black First Lady making history in the White House. Mind blown!

In so many of the ways that women were able to lead since 2009, my daughter has had role models. From Michelle Obama to Tiana, Disney's

first black princess, 2009 was the year that these historical moments shaped the world my daughter was to live in. My daughter had representation and role models in places hadn't been to any of us before her.

I wonder what future events she'll see; the first Black woman to become British Prime Minister? A Black Woman become the President of the United States of America? I wonder what the world will look like for the little girls after Freya. That's as difficult for me to imagine as my world probably was for Lorita.

The gratitude I have for my grandmother's grandmother Lorita, and the hope for my unborn granddaughter's granddaughter represent the power and the beauty black women have in our history and in our present. The history isn't merely the accolades and achievements that are historic. The history is who we are to each other. It's who we are because of each other. However worthy of recognition and celebration my own success may be, my first success was that of becoming a black daughter. I do not stand alone. Instead, I'm in a series of personal history making black women who have defied the odds time and time again. My success is our success.



## About the author

Sarah Henry is a published author in *People Not Pathology: Freeing therapy from the medical model*, a counselling tutor and therapeutic counsellor. Her national work on race and ethnicity also includes training, keynote speaking and both business and personal consultation.

To the black women who made my personal history. You are the ones who will always inspire me. You are the ones whose stories I will continue to tell. I admire your strength and your determination. I know where I get it from!

To the black women who make my personal future. The love I have for you all before I have met you is motivation for me, without that ever being a debt to repay for you. This story gifts you context, inspiration and hope for who you are. You get that from us!

To black women everywhere. You are never alone. Our history never leaves us. We are all history makers.



## Photography references

Page 16 top right: Florence, Salome and Sarah c. 1990

Page 17 bottom right: Salome, Malvia and Freya 2014

