# Stella Dadzie interviewed by Samenua Sesher, Respect Due, Museum of Colour

**00.01**

**Introduction Music**

‘Intro’ by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00:08**

**Samenua Sesher**

You're listening to Respect Due.

**00.16**

**Introduction music**

‘Elision’ by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00.22**

**Samenua Sesher**

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves.

**01:09**

**Stella Dadzie**

My name is Stella Dadzie. I'm a writer, teacher, and historian, and also an activist of many years.

**1.20**

**Samenua Sesher**

This is the voice of the trailblazing changemaker Stella Dadzie. In the late 1970s, Stella co-founded the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent, a central plank of the UK civil rights movement. She is the co-author of the award-winning book *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain*, which was republished by Verso in 2018 as a feminist classic. Her most recent work, *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery and Resistance*, was published in 2020.

Before we get started, just a quick warning that this episode contains descriptions of slavery and violence against women, which may be upsetting for some listeners.

Now, I'm interested in your journey into activism. Could you tell me briefly about your early life and some of the formative experiences that set you on this particular path?

**02:13**

**Stella Dadzie**
What's pertinent, I think, is that I'm the product of an interracial relationship. My father was Ghanaian, and I've had very close ties with Ghana throughout my life, which I think has given me a good kind of Afrocentric grounding, and a fairly strong sense of my own identity. My mother, an Englishwoman, was quite a damaged person I think, she had a lot of issues - not least being the single parent of a black child in the fifties, which was not at all easy. But those two influences were certainly formative for me.

I really couldn't say that there was a moment for my activism. I think it came about as a result of, possibly, my experiences in Germany, where I was living during the early seventies, where I had a very upfront, in-your-face experience of racism, that was probably far more obvious to me than the lace curtain variety that I've experienced in Britain. And I went there fairly naive and not particularly conscious of what was going on in the world - other than through my exposure to Ghana where, of course, there were a lot of civil rights activists coming and, you know, newly independent African state, there was that consciousness there - but certainly, I returned from Germany with a very large Afro, and began to involve myself, initially, in journals that promoted various civil rights issues, both here and on the African continent. But increasingly I felt isolated and I was increasingly drawn towards other women who were doing similar things.

**04:00**

**Samenua Sesher**
Okay, so this led to that 1978 moment where you co-founded OWAAD – so, Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent. Could you just tell us a little bit about OWAAD, its creation, and why was it different to anything that was before?

**04:18**

**Stella Dadzie**
It came about because women were tired of being coffee-makers and minute-takers, they were tired of seeing the issues that affected us put down the agenda, and tired of being told that if they raised these issues, they were somehow splitting the struggle. So, a group of us came together at Warwick University, initially with an idea of sort of forming a caucus within a larger organisation called the African Student Union, but it soon became apparent in the discussions we had that day, particularly with, actually, women from African organisations like ZANU-PF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front - women who had experience, not just of activism or, you know, discussions, but actually, in some cases, taking up arms to fight for their own liberation - and they were unanimous, they said, 'Listen, if you want to be

autonomous, if you want to have a voice, you need to set up your own thing.’

So OWAAD came about as a result of that. Initially, it was the women… Organisation of Women of Africa and African Descent, but it soon became apparent to us that the issues that we were concerned about affected Asian women in this country - perhaps not in an identical way, but certainly the kinds of concerns they had were coming from the same source, which was race, gender, and class inequalities. And also, I think it's important to mention that the context was of many Asian women arriving in Britain from Africa, from East Africa in particular, who defined themselves as African. So, you know, there was a whole lot of considerations that went into the mix.

But ultimately, I think it was quite a progressive organisation. It was different in that it made that agenda overt, it was different in that it organised around principles that were very woman-centric, and by that I mean we didn't have, you know, a hierarchy, we didn't have identified leaders. We saw ourselves as an umbrella group that brought together all the different community women's groups and organisations that were springing up around the country. So, I think in a lot of ways OWAAD was unique. And it's certainly fair to say that, although the organisation itself was relatively short-lived, I mean, it survived for about five years, its impact continues to be felt to this day.

**06:59**

**Samenua Sesher**

What do you feel were some of the key successes or indeed impacts that OWAAD had?

**07:06**

**Stella Dadzie**
Well, OWAAD had feelers throughout the community, just through the nature of the way it was structured. And what that meant is that OWAAD was able to raise concerns about education, about police brutality, about discrimination in the workplace, around health inequalities, and around the issues that women, black women, were grappling with at the time, around identity, self-image, and so on and so forth. So, it touched on a lot of issues and enabled and empowered women, I think, to not only develop a vocabulary with which to speak about those issues, but also develop a position around those issues that they were able to take back into their workplaces, into their personal relationships, into their childcare, into their interactions with local schools, and so on and so forth.

So, as I say, because of that, it was the case that many local authorities began to sit up and listen, when black parents were saying things like, 'We don't want sin bins where our kids are singled out and given some kind of remedial, second-class education. We don't want a curriculum that doesn't address our histories, our contributions, or present us in a in a positive light.' And all of those concerns were fed back into schools, and slowly you begin to see the emergence of quite a powerful lobby within organisations like ILEA [Inner London Education Authority], who began to take those issues on and reflect those issues in terms of its curriculum development and its teacher training, and the resources that were available to kids in schools. Now I'm an educationist, so that's my field and my interest, but I think those kinds of ramifications were felt in a lot of other areas as well in similar ways.

**09:12**

**Samenua Sesher**
In 1985, after the organisation disbanded, you co-authored *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain.* Can you tell me a bit about that book and the motivations behind it?

**09:27**

**Stella Dadzie**
The story of how the book came about is that I was doing bits and pieces of work for Virago, the feminist publishers at the time. I was in a really wonderful position because they were feeding me all the books that were coming out of the States at the time, by people like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, and saying, 'Hey, can you read this and tell us whether you think there's a market for it?' That was kind of fun, you know, and it wasn't a full-time job... I have to say, that was in and around my full-time job as a teacher. But what that meant is that I had a connection with Virago, and in 1984 they published a book by Amrit Wilson called *Finding a Voice* which looked at the experience of Asian women, and which was relatively successful. And I was approached with the suggestion that I might want to think about producing something similar.

Because of the way we worked in OWAAD, you know, we were a collective, we took decisions and questions to the group. I did just that and initially, we formed something called ‘the book collective’, and invited any women who wanted to participate to come to our meetings. But, if you know anything about the writing process, and women's lives, you'll understand why the group whittled down. And initially it was just myself, Beverley and Gerlin Bean, then Gerlin went off to Zimbabwe to help with the newly independent - what would you say? - the challenges there, and Suzanne Scafe came on board. So, it ended up with just the three of us. And I'm not sure that we started out with any specific ideas about what the book should be about, but it was very clear to us that we had a story that hadn't been told. It was very clear to us that the best people to tell that story were the women themselves, hence the focus on oral history. It was very clear to us that we had been airbrushed out of history in many different ways and that it was important to put us at the centre of that story, hence the use of the collective ‘we’ in the narrative and, as I say, hence the use of ordinary women's lives and stories to guide the narrative.

So yes, it was an important book, it won an award: the Martin Luther King award in '85. And it wasn't all positive feedback, you know, there were historians who said, you know, ‘Oral history, goodness me, whatever next?’ (laughter) There were people who were uncomfortable with it, but it certainly stood the test of time. And as I say, it was republished a couple of years ago to the same kind of interest and relief among black women that we experienced thirty years ago. I think it still speaks to young black feminists to this day, and not necessarily feminists, young black women.

**12:28**

**Samenua Sesher**
I suppose what I want to ask you is about where you think we are now. And you've sort of touched on that by saying this book that you wrote in the eighties is resonating with black women now, and you also talked earlier about race, class and gender, the things that were binding African and Asian women. And I just wonder what you think about how far we still have to go in these areas?

**12:50**

**Stella Dadzie**
Well, one of the reasons it resonates is because so many of the issues haven't gone away. So, when we talk about how our children are faring in our schools, how black women experience health inequality, how we tend to live in the worst housing, have the poorer job prospects, etc. All of those things are still pertinent to this day, as are the issues that concern us on the interpersonal level: our sexuality, our self-image, how we relate to the fact that we are black, and that we have natty hair, and that we bring all those things to the table. So, I think that's why the book was so well received thirty years on.

In terms of its relevance to today, and where we're at… we've only got to look at the Black Lives Matter movement to see how very much we're still engaged in that struggle. And I don't know about you, but I think we have got a way to go.

What heartens me is the feeling that, for the younger generation who've lived through Black Lives Matter and whose consciousness has been raised by the discussions and the demonstrations and the engagements online, is that I feel that generation will be touched by it in the same way as my generation was touched by the civil rights movement, and all the African liberation struggles that were waging across the continent. So, I do think that, you know, there's some positivity in the message that we have a way to go, because I'm looking very much at handing over those struggles to a younger, more energised generation. And I think the discussions I've had with black young women across the country in the wake of the republication and also in the context of my latest book's launch… what that says to me is that there are some really engaged, conscious, vibrant young people out there - both male and female - and they will pick these issues up and make them their own.

**15:00**

**Samenua Sesher**
You touched on your new book, *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery and Resistance.* So, this was published by Verso in October last year. Why was it so important to you to write about women's resistance in particular?

**15:15**

**Stella Dadzie**
Well, you know, quite often the story of enslavement is a story of victimhood. It's a story of what was done to us by others, in which we

are never afforded any agency. So, it was really important for me to tell that story through a different lens. Now, part of the reason why it's been told in that way is that we've been so dependent in the past on a white male narrative that sees its own experience as central and all-embracing. So, for me, it was about focusing on that particular aspect of hidden history and bringing those stories to life, trying to look for the music behind the words of those white plantation owners and diarists and letter writers and overseers who left us enough tantalising evidence to be able to weave our own story.

And I should say, absolutely upfront, that it is not original work: historians, particularly Caribbean historians, but not exclusively - people like Hilary Beckles, people like Barbara Bush, Monica Schuler, Lucille Mathurin Mair, Edward Kamau Brathwaite - there's a whole roll call of Afro-centric historians who had begun to engage with the primary sources to look at that material, to say, ‘Well, what does that mean? What are the implications for women?’

My role, I felt, was to make that history accessible, make what has largely been an academic debate accessible to a much wider audience - black women, particularly, but everybody else in general. And although it came out around the time of the Black Lives Matter protest, it was actually in the making for many years before that, and I just feel it came out at a timely moment, really.

**17:22**

**Samenua Sesher**

Can I ask you about the title? It is so powerful – *A Kick in the Belly.* Where does it come from? And what has it meant to you?

**17:33**

**Stella Dadzie**
Okay, it comes from a diary entry. A guy, an absentee planter called Monk Lewis, who travelled to Jamaica a couple of times and kept a detailed diary. And at some point, I think during his second visit, he visits plantations that he owns on both ends of Jamaica, and witnesses acts of brutality on both occasions - one resulted in a woman being crippled, another resulted in an injury to her unborn child. And his diary entry says words to the effect that, 'I feel I'm entitled to say that black women are kicked in the belly from one end of this island to the other.' So it felt to me a really powerful metaphor for what actually happened to enslaved black women. We were kicked in the belly in so many different ways, both metaphorically and literally.

But it also felt to me that it was a powerful metaphor for how black women responded, because we also kicked out and we kicked back into the belly of slavery, and because the survival of the very institution rested on the wombs of black women post-1807. There were no fresh supplies, officially, so if you wanted to have slaves, you needed to breed them. So, the whole project of slavery rested on us. And how we dealt with that is central to the story of how enslaved people resisted and fought back.

**19:08**

**Samenua Sesher**
How did you find the actual signs of resistance? How were you able to sort of read that into the text?

**19:16**

**Stella Dadzie**
I don't think it was about finding it. I think, you know… you will know, we bring our own sensibility to every experience and everything we read, as black women, that is inevitable. So, what seemed really important to me was that, you know, you looked at the existing text - the letters, the plantation records - with a black female gaze. So, when you see, for example, data that shows that on a particular plantation so many women died because of gynaecological complications, or so many babies died within days of being born and their mothers followed suit… you can't read that as a black woman without beginning to think about what that meant for those individual women who had that experience. So, I don't think I had to seek it out. It was kind of there for me.

What I needed to do, I think was to begin that story earlier, because so often the story begins halfway through the Middle Passage. If you're lucky, it starts in the barracoons or on the coffle line, but where it fails to really delve down is into the things - the strengths, the beliefs, the knowledge, the sense of self - that black women brought with them, prior to ever stepping on the coffle line, that comes out of a tradition that is partly matriarchal, which comes out of societies, many of which had no barriers for black women to rise through the ranks to become powerful leaders, both spiritual, military and tactical.

Those young women who were herded onto those ships came with that, naked as they were, and they brought that with them. So, they were able to build on that. And I see that as very central to their survival.

**21:30**

**Samenua Sesher**
Did thought go into the sort of style that you wanted? So, you've described where you wanted to start, but did you think about how you wanted to approach telling these stories?

**21:44**

**Stella Dadzie**
I'm an absolute disciple of accessibility. I'm a teacher by trade and it seems to me that if we are to engage with this history, we have to think about who that history is for. And as I said earlier, it's not exclusively for black people. But it is… it starts with them. Why? Because we need to know who we are, we need to know where we came from, and we need to have powerful, positive stories about our past to counteract all the negativity we've endured over centuries.

I also had some useful feedback early on in the process, and a couple of people said, 'Bring yourself into the story,' which I found quite difficult to do, actually, because I'm not used to talking about myself in that way. So those snapshots of myself as a child and myself walking around Elmina Castle, I think that was important in personalising the story, and it also legitimated it because, I don't know about you, I'm not of Caribbean origin, I'm Ghanaian, but as far as I'm concerned, it was my mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers who were stolen away. So, it's as much my story as it is a Jamaican woman's story, or a Bajan woman's story, or anyone who can trace their ancestry back to the islands. So, I think that was important too.

I'm a great one in promoting unity and sisterhood among black women. And it seems to me that it is absolutely pointless for us to focus on the issues that concern us here in the UK, in 2021, if we don't link those narratives and stories and experiences to what's happening to black women across the world. And I don't use the term ‵woman of colour′ because it doesn't rest easy with me, but I do mean all those women of African and Asian and other descent whose lives have been impacted by race and racism.

The other thing I suppose that I would mention is towards the end of the book: my endeavour to show that these issues haven't gone away, that the fight against slavery is still a current one, whether it's sex trafficking, the abuse of migrant workers, the bodies of black women who lie on the bottom of the English Channel and the Mediterranean. Those are stories of slavery that continue to impact on the lives of tens, hundreds, millions of black women to this day, and if we are outraged by the historical version, then it is incumbent on us to protest and speak out against those issues that resonate with the story today.

**24:49**

**Samenua Sesher**

Honestly, I just feel like I could talk to you for the rest of the day. But I want to ask you specifically about something you said in a Guardian interview about working on a novel. Can you tell us anything about that?

**25:03**

**Stella Dadzie**
I can. The story was based on… I won't mention her, but it was the life of an elderly lady who I knew, through the eighties into the early nineties when she died, unfortunately. I sat at her feet, I took her story down, and I was able to interrogate her story. Now, she was in her late eighties, early nineties when she told me her life, and the historian in me obviously had to research that. And in doing so, I found anomalies or things that couldn't have happened, because so-and-so wouldn't have been alive, you know, that kind of stuff, which made me decide that I wouldn't just reproduce the transcript of my interview, which was my initial plan. I would reproduce her story as a novel that spans the 20th century, and which is the story of how a woman who knew nothing about herself when she was brought here as a young child, at the turn of the last century, turns into a powerful black woman with a strong sense of identity. And, you know, everything that brought her to that place. So that's the story that I'm trying to write.

As I say, it might not come out till I'm dead, because I don't even want to say how long I've been picking the story up and putting it down. Part of it is the age-old problem that I think many black women face, which is that, up until very recently, we don't often have the time or the luxury or the space to just say, 'Leave me alone, I want to write.' You know, we have children, we have careers, we have partners, we have community issues - all those things that get in the way. And I'm afraid because I've been an activist all my life, that was also one of the one of the things that forced me to put it on hold. I was always looking for this magical few weeks when I'd be able to roll up my sleeves, forget everybody else existed, live on cheese and apple and, you know, things I didn't have to cook, and just get on with my writing. And when I did that, great, but then I'd have to switch to something else, and by the time I came back to it, I'd sometimes find it quite difficult to pick up my voice. That's not by way of an excuse, I think it's a process that many, many writers face and we need to be upfront and say, you know, sometimes that beautiful prose you see doesn't just trip off the tongue.

**27:29**

**Credit Music**

'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**Samenua Sesher**

Stella Dadzie was nominated by the Huntley Archive, the personal archives of the pioneering publishers Eric and Jessica Huntley, housed at the London Metropolitan Archives.

Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Sesher, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at https://museumofcolour.org.uk/. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.