

Dr Jan Etienne

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today it is my great honour to welcome Dr Jan Etienne to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

Dr. Etienne has been a part of our community here at Birkbeck for 23 years. Few people have done more than her in widening participation and increasing the recruitment and retention of students from black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

This is a time to loudly broadcast our thanks to such a remarkable champion for Birkbeck.

So, who is Dr. Jan Etienne? Her parents came to the UK from St Lucia in the late 1950s. Her father was employed on the assembly line at Ford's manufacturing factory while her mother worked as a hospital auxiliary nurse. Despite the fact that, from her childhood, her parents fostered in her the importance of education, her early years at school were difficult. She went to Rokesly infant and junior school in Hornsey (North London) and then to the prestigious Hornsey High School for Girls. When she returned home every afternoon, however, she was responsible for the chores in the home and looking after her four brothers. Was it any wonder that she was branded a "disengaged" scholar?

None of this stopped her in adulthood. She sought to make a difference to the world and, in particular, to the lives of disadvantaged people. Etienne has a long history of serving her community. She worked as a community volunteer and then housing support officer with Ujima Housing (Ujima means "working together" in Swahili), which was Britain's oldest and biggest Black-led housing association, providing accommodation and work for minority ethnic youngsters in the inner city. She was a woman's rights officer in Hackney, a race relations adviser in Haringey, and head of the Housing Equalities Unit in Hammersmith and Fulham. She also served as a local

councilor and chair of the Education Committee in Brent, as well as being an Executive Governor of Ruskin College, Oxford.

She first joined Birkbeck in 1994 as an Extra Mural Studies teacher. She taught on a vast range of Birkbeck short courses at local colleges and in other “off-site” rooms in places such as Hackney and Haringey. In 2008, she took on the formidable task of managing the BSc Social Science programme, an undergraduate programme in the School of Social Sciences, History, and Philosophy. She has been responsible for a number of conferences and training programmes aimed at widening participation both locally (at our Stratford campus) and internationally (at the University of the West Indies’ Open Campus).

Along the way, she has won prizes, such as the Michael Stephens award for her PhD research. Most notably, she is an inspired and inspiring teacher. She knows what mature, part-time students are going through – helped, in part, by the fact that she did her own PhD here at Birkbeck, studying part-time in the Department of Social Policy and Education. In 2007, she was crowned “Birkbeck distinguished sessional lecturer” and, the following year, was part of the teaching team awarded the Times Higher Education “Widening Participation Initiative of the Year” award. In 2017, she was awarded a “Colours and Honours” certificate from the Birkbeck Students’ Union. This is a prestigious award where the Students’ Union honours people for their contributions to the Birkbeck community. It is given to those who have “gone the extra mile to make the Birkbeck Community great”. Etienne was given this award for her work providing one-to-one student academic support and for teaching excellence.

But she has also contributed to our academic understanding of lifelong learning. Her academic interests began when she was appointed as a research assistant for a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to study lifelong learning and the Women’s Institute, the largest voluntary organisation of women in the UK. It was a steep learning curve but one in which she excelled and enjoyed.

However, it also drew her attention to the low numbers of older Black women in academic research. The Women's Institute is still largely white and middle-class. Most of the women she spoke to were based in rural areas. It was this study that made her think about the learning lives of black women of her mother's generation.

She has published research with titles such as "Lifelong Learning in Later Years: Choices and Constraints for Older Women" and "Beyond the Home: Informal Learning and Community Practice for Older Women". With Fiona Mackay, she wrote "Black Managers in Further Education: Career Hopes and Hesitations", which received the prize for the "best research publication" from the British Educational, Leadership and Management and Administration Society. In that research, they showed that, contrary to nice-sounding rhetoric about equal opportunities, black managers in postgraduate programmes experience severe barriers in progressing their careers.

But there is no doubt in my mind that her magnum opus is her book, Learning in Womanist Ways: Narratives of First Generation African Caribbean Women (2016). This is a "must read" for anyone interested in the social dimension to learning and the state of Britain today. The book begins with one question: "How does it feel to be older, black and female and have the desire for purposeful learning?" There is only one way to answer such a question: you ask them. Etienne travelled all around the UK – eleven cities in the end – speaking to over 100 first-generation Caribbean migrants to Britain. She found that gender, age, and ethnicity meant that while these women were more in need of adult learning, they were less likely to participate in it. The barriers are formidable: cost, accessibility, information about opportunities, and the cultural appropriateness, or otherwise, of provisions.

What, she asks, is the point of lifelong learning? Is it about social justice, creating active citizens? Or is it more about socio-economic transition, a kind of skills- and confidence-based learning? Some scholars adhere to a social movement model, in which people come together to address an urgent local social concern. For older Black women, this could take the form of considering a "lost role beyond the home".

Or, is lifelong learning part of a socially progressive movement? This seems to be the model that Etienne favours. As she puts it, this model requires a commitment to challenging education systems, being actively committed to social and institutional change.

Learning in Womanist Ways is a feminist project, incorporating black feminism, womanism, Afrocentric feminism, and Africana womanism. “Taken together” she maintains that “these construct a different reality and a distinct way of gathering information about the lives of groups of black women”. More critically, she argues that this approach also “moves the debate away from the intersectional categories identified by [other] British scholars that potentially encourage deficit models through their negative connotations”. She uses a beautiful phrase throughout the book: “multiple, polyrhythmic realities” .

So far, I may be giving you the impression that Learning in Womanist Ways is an innovative, feminist text but otherwise composed much like other academic books. Not so. The reason I loved this book so much is because Etienne not only summarises and analyses the “data” she collects through talking with these older West Indian women, but she also invites us into the room, allowing us to hear their voices. Much of the book is composed of dramatized acts, presented in a West Caribbean theatrical manner. She begins each chapter by setting the scene for each of the “acts”, and then lets the women tell their stories, with short “asides” from herself. We hear their colloquialisms, grammar, Creole patois. They tease and challenge; reminisce and laugh. They get angry.

Only someone with Etienne’s skills and empathy could successfully do this project. She is greatly loved. The reasons are clear: she is a brilliant and empathetic teacher, a generous listener. She is funny. She is inexhaustible in fighting for the rights of others.

Etienne retired from Birkbeck on 31st October 2017 –but is still active in our community. She is simply one of Birkbeck’s finest champions. In the words of one of the women she interviewed, “Keep the spirit of the carnival alive!”

We are thrilled to welcome Dr Jan Etienne to a Fellowship at Birkbeck, where she can continue to keep it alive.