

The Joyce C Mitchell Cook

Memorial Lecture 2022



Anita Avamides introduces the recently inaugurated annual Joyce Mitchell Cook Memorial Lecture.

“I would say that I have to create whatever value there is in my life. I reject a religious point of view. I think that I’m here to make sense of my life and to give meaning to it. Now, I have arrived at that point of view beyond any considerations about colour. And I think that is it true of me, of a white person, of a red person.”

These words were written by Joyce Mitchell Cook, the first black American woman to receive a PhD in philosophy—at Yale in the United States. Some years before that, from 1955-57, she came to St Hilda’s College, Oxford, to study for her second BA in the Honours School of PPP (Philosophy, Psychology and Physiology—now PPL, Philosophy, Psychology and Linguistics). With the generous support of the Faculty of Philosophy, and thanks to a donation from a contemporary and College friend of Joyce’s, Professor Elinor Shaffer, St Hilda’s has established an annual lecture to commemorate the achievements of Joyce Mitchell Cook. Due to the pandemic, the series was launched online in the Spring of 2021. The Inaugural speaker was Professor Anita Allen, Henry R. Silverman Professor of Law and professor of philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. The lecture was followed by questions from an invited panel of current and ex-students: Lawrence Okoth-Odida, Omblin Damy, and Buki Fatoma. In the

Spring of 2022 St Hilda’s hosted the on-site launch of this series, with a talk by Professor Kathryn Sophia Belle, Associate Professor of Philosophy and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University. Professor Belle is also the founding director of the *Collegium of Black Women Philosophers*, and the author of several books and articles. Her latest book *Beauvoir and Belle: A Black Feminist Critique of The Second Sex* will be published by Oxford University Press next year.

Professor Belle spoke to us of the achievements of several black women whom she termed ‘true philosophers’—including Joyce Mitchell Cook, the campaigner and activist Claudia Jones, and the 18th century slave-turned-poet, Phillis Wheatley (pictured with Joyce Mitchell Cook above). With these women as leading examples, she encouraged future generations of black women to join the ranks of true philosophers, and she called for philosophy to widen its horizons and embrace new philosophical perspectives—including ones that will speak to a new generation of black women philosophers.

As we can see from Joyce’s words, her commitment to philosophy went deep and beyond race. While at Oxford she studied with,

among others, Jean Austin, Mary Warnock, and Peter Strawson. She graduated with highest honours. Back in the US, her PhD supervisors included Paul Weiss and Wilfred Sellars. She went on to succeed Paul Weiss as the Managing Editor of the philosophical journal *The Review of Metaphysics*. After receiving her PhD, she taught for a time at Yale—the first woman graduate student teaching assistant to be appointed at Yale in any subject outside of a foreign language subject.

By instituting this annual lecture in her name, we hope that generations of students will be able to remember Joyce Mitchell Cook, and all that she accomplished in philosophy. And to this end St Hilda’s College, also with the support of Professor Shaffer, has established a graduate scholarship fund for BAME students to come to Oxford, and St Hilda’s, to study philosophy. In 2022, the College has partnered with the University’s Black Academic Futures programme, using the Joyce Mitchell Cook Fund to create a fully-funded scholarship in Philosophy.

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Professor Kathryn Sophia Belle