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2019 Pre-Doctoral Grant Update

3/29/21

In December 2020, I defended my doctoral dissertation, “Creating Welfare, Nursing Empire: Colonial Nursing and the National Health Service.” This project tells the story of how and why Caribbean, African, and Southeast Asian women quite literally nursed the NHS and its mostly white patients from its launch in 1948 through the late 1970s. These women were initially brought to Britain as part of a development project to train highly skilled nursing leaders for British colonies. But Britain’s hunger for nurses, at a time of severe nursing shortages worldwide, turned the development project into a pipeline of low-cost labor for the NHS. In hospital wards across the United Kingdom, Black and brown nurses cared for the sick bodies of white British citizens. Their labor rescued the NHS from catastrophic labor shortages and ensured the continued survival of universal health care in Britain. Yet their recruitment and employment in British hospitals contributed to the long-term impoverishment of health care resources in their own countries.

The uneasy relationship between nursing and colonialism has been an increasing subject of interest for nursing historians—and as our current moment makes clear, one with direct implications for the global provision of health care today. My dissertation contributes to this ongoing conversation by narrating the story of post-colonial nursing from the perspective of the British NHS. Rather than disappearing entirely after the Second World War, I show how the project of “nursing the empire” instead came to encompass new forms of migration and exchange. The British nursing leaders responsible for recruiting colonial students saw their recruiting work as part of—not counter to—nursing projects overseas. These nurse administrators designed programs to recruit carefully selected colonial students for training in British hospitals, with the idea that these British-trained colonial nurses would return home to create modern health care systems in the Commonwealth. But the rhetoric of benevolent uplift was always in tension with the more self-interested needs of the British nursing labor market and the professional and personal desires of would-be nurses themselves. Hospital managers recruited nurses with little regard for official procedures, and prospective students in the colonies traveled to Britain in search of training and expanded opportunities. For many individual nurses, these interlocking processes created new opportunities to enter the nursing profession. But my dissertation also shows how, in the aggregate, these processes created new forms of inequality in the hospitals of the NHS and the health care systems of former British colonies.

I intended to complete final research for this project in the spring of 2020 with the assistance of the H-31 Pre-Doctoral Grant that I received from the AAHN in spring 2019. I planned to travel to UK archives to conduct research for the fourth chapter of the dissertation. This chapter explores how, in the 1970s, a series of newly restrictive immigration laws placed many overseas student nurses in legal limbo and catalyzed public debates about Britain’s dependence on overseas recruitment. But just as I began to make arrangements to visit UK archives, the entire archives sector—and international travel—shut down due to Covid. Unable to gather new materials, I decided to dive deeper into the perspectives of the historical subjects I already encountered by analyzing previously-gathered materials in new ways and putting existing sources in new conversations. For example, I brought together material from international student groups, the surviving issues of a 1970s nursing newspaper, and nursing education reports from the UK National Archives, as well as print sources available through the British Newspaper Archive. By doing so, I was able to better analyze how nurses of color articulated their experiences with British immigration law, and how white nursing educators attempted to grapple with the very real inequalities written into overseas recruitment.

As I turn towards revising my dissertation as a monograph, and launching future projects in the history of nursing, I am grateful for the AAHN’s support of my work and other projects at the intersection of nursing, race, and colonialism.