

OPEN Summary of oral history interview with Charmaine Brown

Date of interview: 13th October 2021

[01:25:41- 01:41:07] **GDPR CONCERN: Following a GDPR SENSITIVITY REVIEW, this section of the interview and summary has been redacted from Public Access. It has also been removed/ muted from the Listening/ Public Access copy of the recording.**

INTERVIEW WITH: Charmaine Brown
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Gudgin
LOCATION: South London Gallery, Peckham

File number: CHARMAINE_BROWN_WAV_FILE
DURATION: [01:35:16]

[00:00:00]

Dr Charmaine Brown, born Kingston Jamaica in 1962, when Jamaica was part of the British Empire. Came to the UK 1964 after Jamaica became Independent, part of the Windrush Generation.

Parents maintained a Caribbean presence in the UK, customs and cultures. Education was key, which is a Caribbean tradition; they maintained the same lifestyle and went to church. Also eat Jamaican food and parents went to Brixton market, to buy seasonal and traditional foods. No English cuisine. Maintained Caribbean lifestyle through her childhood. Brixton market was a Saturday ritual, father wouldn't go, meet up with other Caribbean housewives and it was a social gathering. Market traders realised they could make money by selling Caribbean foods. It was also a way of catching up with news from back home as they relied on telegram for weekly news.

[00:03:42] Father had come to the UK first in 1961, as part of skilled workers initiative, instigated by Enoch Powell, to build the UK economy. He was a painter and decorator in the UK. As Jamaica was part of the British Empire, he was entitled to bring over his family. Father didn't meet Charmaine until 1964. Mum travelled with all seven children on a decommissioned cruise ship, three week voyage. Youngest brother born in 1966.

Mum was a seamstress through apprenticeship. In the UK she did clothes for the children and family. She took on night roles so that she could be there when the kids came home. In common with other Caribbean women, she worked at Lipton's tea factory in East London and catering jobs. Towards the end of her working life, she was a home help working for social services. Parents relocated to Jamaica in 1988.

Family lived at 55 Herne Hill Road SE24, very pleasant road. It was a private house rented out to several families. The eight of them shared two rooms which was traditional. Kitchen and cooker on the landing. Temporary washing in the room. Sunday bath in the basement with a meter. Two other Jamaican families lived there, they couldn't get on the housing list.

The women flocked together, children had company. Because of the overt racism at the time, it was a safe haven and they looked out for each other. When mother went to work, she left them with another tenant. Mother talks fondly of this time.

[00:09:19] After they left there, they obtained a council property at 25 Aston House, Wandsworth Road, block of flats. Four bedroom flat over two floors, but their neighbours were racist and they

have very negative memories of that time. When their father left for work, the neighbour would try to pick on their mother and them. One neighbour had an Alsatian dog which he would unleash when they came out. The dog roamed the balcony and they were frightened. Era of skinheads, clashes, running down people who didn't look like them, with their Alsatian dogs, knuckledusters. Attended James Barry Primary School where the racism continued with the children. They lived across the road from a notorious police station on Union Road which was known for injustices. All together the environment was negative.

Finally left there and moved to a seven bedroom house in East Dulwich which her parents bought, which was much nicer 27 Sylvester Road. At that time, East Dulwich was a mixture of immigrant families and families who were born in the UK, it wasn't gentrified at all. Neighbours were pleasant to each other, it had independent shops, but not like the gentrified mix of today. The shops were affordable, description of shops and was an area where you could get anything. No racial tension, people socialised over the garden fence, dad helped elderly English neighbours. Cordial relations.

[00:14:50] Parents were not well educated. Elder brother and sister won scholarships to prestigious Jamaican schools, but couldn't go because they were coming to the UK, Mum felt guilty. Father was totally illiterate and mother didn't complete her high school education. Parents wanted kids to have opportunities that they hadn't had.

As children they weren't allowed out in the street to play. Their parents told them 'if you have spare time, you need to take up your books' so they were always reading, sometimes out of boredom. They excelled in school and outside of school they were doing scholarly activities. Caribbean families at that time, did not like their kids to be out to play. For boys it may have been allowed with certain conditions, but not for the girls. Although she used to think it was harsh, part of it was protecting them from the racism, which was rampant at that time in that part of London. Parents supported their education with words, but they weren't overbearing.

Oldest brother and sister went to university when Charmaine was still at secondary school, they went to university at a time when it wasn't that common for Caribbean people to attend and she had role models to look up to.

Her older sister followed the Black Panther Movement in America and Charmaine read her sisters books on activism. Other siblings did well too. Parents encouraged them and let them know that education was the only way out of poverty.

Dad didn't learn to read or write until he was around the age of 70. He signed up for a literacy programme on the BBC called *On the Move*. He went to Bingo, even though he couldn't read.

[00:20:20] Charmaine attended Walsingham Secondary School in Clapham, Lewisham College- which at the time was called SELTEC, where she did A-levels. Attended South Bank Polytechnic and studied for a Politics and Language degree. None of these educational establishments taught black history, but Charmaine had a personal interest. At that time, Black History Month wasn't celebrated. She joined the Black Society at university. The people that she associated with were also interested in Jamaican news and injustices in the UK. Never taught it.

She followed the Honourable Marcus Messiah Garvey as a Jamaican national hero and his principals of black empowerment. Listened to his speeches and read his literature. Also Malcom X. Martin Luther King were influences. She watched the Soweto Uprising in South Africa on the news, where the police released the dogs on the children and used water cannons, which made her wonder why were people so cruel.

She also watched *World at War*, which was about the Second World War and the persecution of the Jews, she was shocked. Questioned why a nation could decide another people were inferior and try to persecute and destroy them. Charmaine watched *Roots* and was fascinated that someone could trace their roots to Africa although she was shocked at the horrors of slavery.

On her degree, she studied imperialism as part of the politics module. Remembers thinking the colonisation of Africa wasn't right. These influence combine to make her question how one nation can have authority to enslave others. She mentions the impact that this had on generations to come and is far-reaching. It made her look for ways she can redress injustice within her limitations and minded to support others.

[00:26:22] She worked in hotel and catering after graduating in Gloucester Road as a manager. Many staff were immigrants, but she felt demeaned by the well-heeled clients. She went into teaching part time for ILEA and WEA teaching literacy to people who couldn't read or write up to O-level standard, some of them became authors. She taught English as a foreign language via ESOL for people who had fled a domestic problem overseas, such as the Vietnamese 'boat people' as well as people who had gone through trauma in their own countries such as Somalis, Kurds, Iraqis.

She felt that this work helped to empower her student and to integrate into UK society, even if it was at the super market, parents evening or doctors.

[00:29:00] Charmaine talks about her next job at the Book Place in Peckham High Street where she was education manager from 1989-1994. Its trading name was the Peckham Literacy Project and Peckham Publishing Project, but it was known locally as the Book Place. It was a community education centre, a book shop which sold books from Africa and the Caribbean which you wouldn't find in a traditional English book shop. The Peckham Publishing Project was community publishing and funded by Greater London Arts. A lot of authors got started through this project, African writers but also people from the community. People went from low literacy to gaining a qualification to going on to write. They published books which were on national book lists and these are cited at conferences which Charmaine has been to. It was very influential.

Whilst she was there, she helped the education part of the centre to grow. She also extended it to Peckham Open Learning Centre which she set up.

Charmaine decided to upgrade her qualifications, to pursue a Master's Degree in Education Management. She also worked in Adult Community Learning ACL, in Lewisham part time whilst she was on the Master's degree.

[00:33:34] At this time, Peckham High Street was a very creative community hub. The Book Place attracted people who wouldn't usually go into a book shop, such as people from the African and Caribbean communities. There were also community businesses, Jamaican greengrocer and restaurant, the Women's Centre. Talks about grants from South Council to invest in community groups, which enabled Caribbean enterprises to spring up. Good community feeling. Charmaine allowed local groups to use the centre in the evenings. Dr Femi Biko held classes to educate about the African Diaspora and ancient civilisations. He later lectured at Goldsmiths. Charmaine discusses her other work there.

[00:37:34] In the 80's and '90's the North Peckham Estate which bordered the High Street, was notorious for crime and gangland violence. You didn't go there unless you lived there. Peckham was predominantly houses still, rather than flat. Rye Lane was bustling, Bellenden Road which has

become gentrified had become run down at the time. When she first moved there is was a nice community, but the houses had become run down and shops had closed. Rye Lane was the place to shop and socialise.

It was going through a transition. She also mentions the Peckham uprising which happened after the Brixton riots about injustices and policing, which is still a hot topic in Peckham, though since gentrification, there she hears less sirens, but thinks the police are working in undercover cars in the area.

Peckham High Street was referred to as The Front Line by Caribbean people and they would go there to hang out along the stretch where the Book Place was. Charmaine explains what she means by Front Line and mentions that there could be music and illicit things taking place. There was a heavy Police presence along the Front Line and they did frequent drugs raids. It was a place where you didn't go at night unless you had to and if you did, you would have to walk between groups of men. She says she had to have tunnel vision, focus on where you were going and get out. She thinks the men tried to encourage people to purchase something, but they weren't aggressive.

[00:41:34] Charmaine agree that the murder of Damilola Taylor was the lowest point for Peckham, although there has been several murders on the North Peckham Estate. It was interconnected by walkway. Damilola's murder was the most prominent one and the CCT footage of him skipping to his murder really stuck in people's minds. She talks about the reasons he was picked on. She talks about the killing and how he was left to die. Charmaine reflects on the murder and speaks about how for some gangs a stabbing was a rite of passage or an initiation into the gang. Either they knew he would die or they were ignorant. She realised sometime after the event that this was a rite of passage for gangs and she finds this very disturbing. It was this murder, that marked Peckham for a lot of people, but there were many murders before this one that didn't make the news.

It wasn't until years later, that Charmaine realised how prolific Peckham was for gangs. All the time she was teaching at the Book Place and teaching on the estate, she wasn't aware that this was going on because it wasn't her reality or her world. She has watched documentaries where ex-gang members are part of the narrative and it made her question where she was. She wonders if her students at the Book Place were involved and it has made her reassess what she thinks. She feels sad that she was at the heart of it and didn't know what was going on.

[00:45:00] Whilst Peckham was getting a bad press, Charmaine didn't understand why. She lived in a conservation area, it was far removed, quiet and tree lined. There, she is in one world, then she crosses over into Peckham and she is in another world, but she only tolerates that for a short time, so she it doesn't matter to her.

She agrees Peckham is still like this today, but says Rye Lane is still a local high street which has a lot of negative connotations for the black community, which is linked to crime. Parallel to this road is Bellendon Road which is fully gentrified and another mind-set and the two world don't really meet. Some people go to Rye Lane to buy exotic food, but they are different worlds close which are very close to each other.

Charmaine talks about the policing in Peckham at the time of Damilola Taylors murder. She thinks they already had a plan for the estate which accelerated their plan and for regeneration of that estate. The murder made things go a lot quicker.

She describes the disturbing sound of hearing multiple sirens and 3-4 police cars racing past. she could hear them from her house, some distance away, but wondered what was going on. Maybe

they were 'chasing the baddies', but more often it was the racist policing which was on her mind. It put her on alert and she felt sorry for the young people.

She talks about the rampant stop and search. School boys lined up and police pulling down their trousers and the police would search them. Boys in handcuffs. She speaks about intervening a couple of times, asking if the police had called the boy's parents. Feels she was given excuses. The police are never conciliatory. She thinks they should have been in dialogue with their community liaison officers about their approach to policing. She agrees gangs are bad, but mentions that there are times when police come because a customer may have stolen something and their response was the same as if they were dealing with a drug dealer or murderer, then it is heavy handed. Corrupt policing in Peckham. 2-3 police cars arriving together in Rye Lane, they worked in packs.

[00:50:00] Charmaine hears less police sirens these days. She thinks this is linked to gentrification and they have broken down of certain areas like Rye Lane and the North Peckham Estate no longer exists in the format it used to be. She thinks they have less funding and she has had interviews with the Chief Superintendent of the Borough of Southwark and also the Inspector of Police in Peckham as part of the Rye Lane Campaign. Peckham Police Station no longer has a counter service. Their mode of operation is the same, but they are using unmarked cars without the sirens. They still come in packs and their mentality it still the same.

[00:52:30] Charmaine talks about the settlement of the Caribbean community in Peckham which formed around the 1950's, prominent in the 1960's and tailed off in the 1990's. During the 1980's there was a lot of provision for the Caribbean community such as the Dominos Club run by Dominicans. Pubs owned by Caribbean landlords and frequented by the Caribbean community such as the Walmer Castle which is closed now, The Lyndhurst and three pubs on the High Street. The Caribbean community integrated a lot, there was more integration in those days. There was a multipurpose provision for the community with boxing, darts, nursery which the Council demolished where the Peckham Leisure Centre is now.

The Caribbean community felt more settled and there was a bustling social life. Night life, some of the community had been able to purchase their own homes and there were certain houses where weekly parties were held called *shebeens* or basement parties. There was also social clubs, Dominoes in the day became a social in the evening. The Bouncing Ball on Peckham High Street was another club was a prominent nightclub which attracted international artists especially from Jamaica. The pubs with Caribbean landlords also did a social with sound system for dancing.

[00:57:00] The Caribbean community left a legacy in the area because they invested in the social capital. They went from being tenants in one room to owning their own houses and in Bellendon renewal area they created their own businesses such as hairdressing, nurseries, clubs etc. financial arrangements such as a credit union called a *pardner*, they weren't able to go in the mainstream.

She speaks about the importance of the local barber shops which the younger generation inherited. Some people owned shops which they leased out to younger up and coming people.

For the first set of families who settled in Bellendon Road, it was an area with affordable housing, but also a place where people were prepared to sell housing to them. From there, other families came to realise they could buy houses.

The Irish and Caribbean/ Jamaica communities in London always got on well. The Irish used to joke, 'Thank God for the Jamaican now they won't pick on us anymore'. There were similarities in the communities, socialising, and commonalities of being colonized. Similarities in language, words

like *tink* and other words are common. There is also a shared history because the Irish had worked as indentured labourers in Jamaica.

[01:01:38] Charmaine thinks the story of the Caribbean community is being deliberately airbrushed out of history. She joined the Peckham History Society and Peckham Vision, they look at the history of the area and how they could restore it, especially if it had Georgian history etc. However she has not heard anything about Caribbean history being mentioned in connection with Peckham's history, even from esteemed historians. She thinks that it's because it has no value to these historians. But for her, any contributions from communities have value. Also she thinks they must have come across this history, because it was there for her to find. She thinks it because it doesn't fit their narrative.

She is learning about hidden histories and hearing a lot more about the contribution of the people of the Caribbean to the building of the UK, apart from being key workers. It wasn't taught at school. The Windrush generation goes up 1973. The only Caribbean history in Peckham that people know about is *Desmonds* the barber shop on the TV series.

Charmaine says there is a body of people interested in this history, but they only talk among themselves because people think that no one wants to hear the story. It feels good to talk about it, which is why she started the gentrification lectures. It's all there, but no one is really celebrating it. The older generation are now dying off and the stories are dying with them.

[01:06:21] Charmaine couldn't have foreseen the changes and gentrification of Peckham when she was working at the Book Place. Although she was in receipt of funding to expand on education provision in the area and entice people attending the Job Centre to upgrade their education. Even when they demolished the North Peckham Estate, she couldn't imagine what it was going to be replaced with. It was a pleasant surprise to see the town houses.

When the Bellenden Road Renewal Project happened and regeneration started to slowly take place it was as a result of a decline in the area which the government had allowed. In this decline period many Caribbean people left the area because it was run down in 1980's. Some returned to the Caribbean due to a financial incentive. As the Caribbean community left, the Nigerian community moved in, but not in the same parts of Peckham. The areas where the Caribbean community had left were the areas which became gentrified. The Nigerians settled in Choumert Road, which became predominantly Nigerian businesses, from there they rented out spaces for churches.

She describes how the Bellenden Road and surrounding street were run down and began to change. All the shop fronts were done up and all the front gardens. Uniformed front walls with house number etched onto them. Restored iron railings of the Victorian houses and brickwork was blasted to clean it up. Street furniture was changed with Anthony Gormely and Zandra Rhodes designs.

Some people sold up as they could make money and the gentrifiers moved in at the same time. The shops and restaurants changed, two estate agents in a small area. The leases went up and this pushed local shop owners out, then the gentrifiers purchased these shops and changed them.

[01:12:20] Charmaine describes who she sees as the gentrifiers, people with an income who have come to the area in the short term and do not intend to invest in the social or cultural capital. She calls them 'short term interlopers'. Of middle class, but not traditional middleclass, who would usually have a long term investment in an area. The gentrifiers do not integrate with the local community they have their own social hub, social network. Peckham is a stepping stone to

somewhere else, maximising their income before moving on. They are mainly white people, but there are some black people who have bought into that culture and feel part of it.

Gentrification has killed the spirit of a once vibrant community. The lifestyle of the gentrifier class is very stilted and predictable, they have set things that they do amongst themselves. Yoga studios, pop up events in the local part, but it's like a social club and there is standoffish behaviour from them which doesn't encourage the local community to join in.

Charmaine talks about the Bussey Building which is vibrant which is on Rye Lane, but a lot of people who shop on Rye Lane don't know it's there. Even if they went to the Bussey Building, they would not think it's not a place for them.

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[01:41:07] Charmaine talks about her academic achievements. Her mum is very proud of her, she's the first Doctor in the family. She states that no matter how hard she works, the odds are stacked against her because of the demographics. She wanted to gain the qualification for her own peace of mind and to be a positive role model to her children and grandchildren and she wanted to pursue a career in academia. She has been training teachers for over 30 years in different capacities. She also had her own consultancy. Education is empowering.

Alongside this, she is also Judicial Officer holder for the Ministry of Justice, where she holds three positions, sitting in employment tribunals since 2002. She used to be a trade union rep. for teachers, always fighting people's corners. She became a member of the Race Panel for employment tribunals when they had the Race Relations Act. She also became a Race Equality Officer sitting with County and District Court Judges in the County Court. Since 2017 she has been sitting in Social Security Tribunals for PIP and DLA awards, where she deals with disabilities cases.

She talks about social justice and empowering people, but also being that person in their corner who understands at tribunals. Often the people she sits with do not understand cases because they are coming from certain demographics, but the Appellants come with stories and life experiences which are so different to them. Often they are doing their jobs, but they don't understand the Appellants' world. However Charmaine can speak for people and if they are at deadlock and she can give reasons and help decided a case. She can speak about their cultural or body language etc.

She talks about the interview process and how her community engagement was very relevant to the role. They were looking for a candidate with community insights because they realised that in the judiciary there is often ignorance about how people really live, which is a class thing. She can give the extra insight. Talks about working with consultants and psychiatrists who don't understand when people presenting with PTSD because they are running from gangs.

She feels good that she can do this and her views count towards a decision and she has been able to sway some outcomes. However, she finds it hard work to make people understand how sometimes people can't overcome obstacles, because of all the other obstacles they are facing.

[01:48:25] Charmaine doesn't think there is enough diversity in the judiciary and there is a lack of understanding as they have not socialised in certain situations or witnessed things that she has

experienced. For Charmaine, the judicial and academic work go hand in hand. She often talks about disability and discrimination in the classroom and it enriches her life.

For her, life has to have an impact and it important to touch people's lives in a positive way. She thinks she could have done a lot more if she was thinking of herself, but when she does, she thinks of her parents working for the sake of it because they didn't have a choice. Despite this, all their children have done well or are in academia. She is showing them, that she is giving back to the community such as support and free legal advice. When she was young she didn't have external support, but now she is being that for others.

[01:35:16] Ends