

OPEN Summary of oral history interview with Joy Gregory

[Part one of two interviews]

Date of interview: 23nd August 2021

[00:07:18-00:07:48] GDPR CONCERN: Following a request from the Interviewee, a section of the audio recording of this interview and its summary has been redacted from Public Access. It has also been removed/ muted from the Listening/ Public Access copy of the recording.

INTERVIEW WITH: Joy Gregory
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Gudgin
LOCATION: South London Gallery, Peckham

File number: JOY_GREGORY_001_WAV_FILE
DURATION: [01:30:11]

[00:00:00]

Joy Gregory was born in Bicester, Oxfordshire on 7 Nov 1959. Describes herself as being of Jamaican heritage.

Both parents born in Jamaica and came to the UK in 1975/58. Moved to Bicester, in order to work at the American base in Upper Hayford, where there was work for people from the Caribbean. The family lived in social housing. Talks about different schools. There were six children in the family.

[00:03:20] Aylesbury did not have many 'people of colour' in the town. Remembers the Pinnock family who had Blues parties and another black family, who kept chickens in their back garden, which appalled the neighbours.

Mother was very gentle and had roses in her garden, but most people assumed that people from the Caribbean were working class, which wasn't true. Mentions colourism in Jamaica. Both parents spent childhood in the countryside and then moved to the town to be educated. After her own mother had died, Joy's mother was brought up by an aunt who was 'quiet snooty'. It was a middle class upbringing and she lived a privileged life with staff. Joy remembers visiting her Dad's family's a where they grew most of their own produce. Mother's family also had land and owned a village

[00:07:18-00:07:48] Redacted Section

Joy felt very aware of being different and was always over-compensating to be liked and included. Spent time a lot of time with cousins in Oxford.

Aylesbury had connections to farming and the land and a cattle market. There was a large printer and publisher called Hazell, Watson and Viney, their reject books ended up on a tip near the abandoned allotments and Joy would get these books and read constantly. Discusses how children had roamed freely from an early age. She remembers that she discovered lots of plants and explored the local canal with a canoe with other children.

[00:13:13] Education was very important to the family, because this was seen as the way that you could change your life. Her parents had come to the UK to give a better education. People had very low expectations of Joy academically, which contrasted with her parents' expectations. As an immigrant family, they put their trust in a fair system, the system wasn't fair.

At school, Joy was made to feel that she was not capable. Recalls telling the careers teacher that she would like to study medicine or go to university but the careers teacher laughed at her and told her that she would be lucky to get a job in Woolworths. This was again at odds with the message from home and Joy did not think she was any more stupid than other people. She learnt later that she had severe dyslexia, but she thought she was quiet bright.

Joy's younger brother had a difficult time at school, because they wanted to put him in special needs despite being very bright. Her rebelled and was very angry. Mother was up the school often because he was in trouble. Joy reflects on why he behaved this way and contrast male and female responses.

Talks about her school experiences. Recalls having a birthday party when she was 7 and the police coming because it was too loud. Awareness of prejudice, but her parents' generation kept their heads down and kept going. Learnt to accept that you had to try twice as hard, or maybe four times as hard to get to the same place, expected.

Recalls father making an application for the US and making a mistake about how many children he had. There were twins in the family who like one person.

[00:18:36] Discusses parent's occupations: dad worked for Airtec. Mum worked at the Nestle factory packing, then a wine factory, then a job at Stoke Mandeville Hospital where she worked on the spinal ward. She met the photographer Samena Rana, who Joy would meet later in life. Mum eventually worked in out patients

[00:22:37] Reflects on the careers officer comment, which made her angry because she knew she was capable and she had friends who had gone to university, who weren't as clever. It took several attempts for her to gain a place, due to her undiagnosed dyslexia. The careers officer knew nothing about Joy, but before she had opened her mother, the careers officer had made up her mind that Joy couldn't go to university.

Joy talks about how her dyslexia, made her slower to do things. She gets distracted when having to sort things out. Joy also has Meares-Irlen syndrome which affects her reading. Slower at processing. Family knew that she wasn't stupid. Dad trusted her to sort out the mortgage because he found it hard. She thinks her dad and brother are also dyslexic. She found different coping mechanisms and managed. Talks about her diagnosis in 2000 after she had Hemiplegic migraines which are like mini strokes and lost the ability to read and her coping mechanisms disappeared. Saw a specialist who helped her and later received a diagnosis.

The comments from the careers officer had come from a place of prejudice because Joy was black.

[00:28:05] By the time Joy was a teenager there were quite a few black families in Aylesbury, thinks they may have had a bad time at the school. However Joy had some fantastic teachers who had belief in her. Joy had a great imagination and enjoyed writing, considered being a writer. Happy to make her own world. Discussion about dyslexia.

[00:32:24] Talks about when *Roots* was shown on tv. Up until this point, they knew they were different and had to compensate for the difference. Speaks about parent's attitude towards her twin brothers' working hard for their apprenticeships.

Remembers her mother's outrage towards *Roots*, which she declared was an untruth and that nobody in her family had ever been slaves. The notion of a plantocracy, never existed for Joy's mother, because they weren't educated about it at school. That generation knew more about the

Empire and the Mother Land and being part of that society, then being part of the history of slavery which was completely erased from their experience. Father was more knowledgeable but would dare say anything in front of mum.

Roots had a big impact on Joy and her brothers, who were into the Black Panther Movement, influenced by reggae and Bob Marley. They said it was a history that needed to be told and we all need to know about it. Mother was a denier and father was a pacifier.

[00:36:38] If mother wasn't so vehemently opposed to *Roots*, it may have passed Joy by. She was very interested in history and recalls having debates with her friends. Went to South Africa House for protests, although her art and politics were separate at this stage.

Joy thinks her mum may have come to accept that slavery was part of their history, but as she was the matriarch of the family, no one dare argue with her. Joy says there was a kind of blindness and denial. Mother's generation found it too painful to accept that they were the descendants of slaves, whereas for others, it was a history that needed to be told and owned and for there to be reparations. Joy thinks her generation have the 'confidence of belonging' and they are not afraid. For first generation immigrants, it is always about being accepted and protecting their children so that they can pass through.

[00:40:30] References a friend who does not have legal status in the UK. She keeps quiet so that she does not jeopardise her situation. Joy thinks the Government has created a very hostile environment over the last 15 years. Brexit has made people feel less secure and deportations have happened, especially in the Windrush generation, whose papers have been destroyed by the government. We are living in 'Kafka country'.

Joy sympathises with her mother's right to take on a different story, because it made her feel safe. Her family were very light-skinned and this created a buffer between them and people who were very dark. Her family were doctors, dentists, shop owners and land owners and she came from a place of privilege. She wasn't brought up in a ghetto, she had a very different experience and had expectations of being part of a ruling class, which that she couldn't come from slaves.

For Joy, *Roots* was the first time she had heard this and she wanted to know more, although she couldn't tell her mum. Not interested in Black Power, more interested in the politics of othering like in South Africa. Mother's attitude was that they had left Jamaica to start a better life and that her children couldn't disrespect the people who had invited them to the table.

[00:45:30] Joy talks about her decision to take art. Remembers learning to use the dark room at school. She went to evening classes to study photography and excelled at it. Didn't feel like a failure, did badly at exams.

Joy got a job at the post office but was very slow at sorting and couldn't understand why. She kept failing her A levels and decided to study art. Moved to London and stayed with a friend. Describes the ease of finding work for young people in the late 1970s. Offered a position at *Vogue*, but was late told that the men there were unhappy having a woman in the darkroom, because they'd have to change their behaviour, she no longer had the job. Hated her job as an accountant so moved home and worked in the wine factory, in order to earn money to pay for her Foundation course, eventually getting a place at Manchester.

[00:51:55] The Foundation Course was at Hugh Wycombe and other students were very 'well heeled'. Other students would invite Joy to go skiing at the weekend and told her to tell the pub

where she worked that she was sick. They didn't understand, they had a lot of disposable income, but this was unheard for Joy.

Went to do Photography at Manchester Polytechnic, but the first year was very difficult and she had financial issues. The course wasn't diverse, but higher education then wasn't diverse generally. Joy's parents had huge belief in her, but if you didn't have this backup, it would be much harder for you and you might end up in a factory or shop. She lived in Hulme, a huge social housing estate that has since been demolished. Everyone would get mugged in Hulme, talks about the estate and its troubles.

[00:58:14] When she moved to Brixton, she remembers it was the first time she was able to walk down the street and not be stared at because of her colour. Contrasts this with growing up in Aylesbury where if she did anything wrong, the whole place would know about it because there were hardly any people of colour. When she was at the Royal College people would ask her why she lived in Brixton because they thought it was a dangerous place, but for Joy, it felt like home, a place where no one knew who she was or even cared.

Parent's attitudes to photography. Parents were indulgent of their children and bought her a Fujita camera for her 18th birthday. Mentions photographing five successful black women for the *Breaking Barriers* exhibition at the Black Cultural Archives.

Recalls her father paved over her mother's roses in the back garden when she was in Jamaica, so that her brothers had somewhere to park their car. Mother was 'quite inflamed' about it and didn't speak to her father for a year.

Parents came to all her exhibitions and were very proud of her for doing an MA, which was quite a rare thing in those days. Recalls John Hedgecoe who was Head of Photography, making a fuss of her parents at the graduation ceremony. Mother came to Joy's graduation at Manchester and combined this with a trip to the markets at the Arndale Centre. Describes the terrible pleated suit that her mother bought her and her friend wetting herself with laughter.

[01:03:38] Joy nearly got thrown out of her course at Manchester. She found working effortless, she was lazy and she was also out clubbing and enjoying herself. She was interested in being experimental in her work although the course was more commercial, she was interested in the science, maths, physics and the technical side of photography such as darkroom and paper. Wanted to understand everything about her materials and making the image and understanding that. Following a particular path but going off-piste of her brief.

At the time there was only 3 or 4 photography degree courses in the country. Her year was only the second year that the course had been a degree; it was very new and highly competitive to get on to.

[01:08:12] When Joy gained a place at the Royal College of Art, she didn't even know what it was. At Manchester her tutors didn't really get her work, but she was lucky because John Tebitt believed in her and was her champion and encouraged her to apply to the Royal College of Art. No one thought she had a chance of getting in to RCA because she wasn't working with photography in the way you were expected to.

Remembers her interview at RCA only being five minutes long and they only asked a few questions, which Joy was appalled about because she had travelled from Manchester. They also asked her whether she would still come if she didn't get a grant and she said she wouldn't, because she knew that she couldn't afford to come without a bursary.

[01:11:26] When the letter came, all of her flat mates went out and she couldn't tell anyone that she had got in.

At the RCA, her friends were outsiders too and they found a flat near Petticoat Lane, which she painted beautiful colours, it was £25.00 a week a huge sum of money. Joy then moved to Brixton in a flat where the landlord thought everyone was the devil.

It was an interesting time at the RCA, there was just 12 people on her course, other black students on other courses, a mixture of students who she remembers. Everyone was an outsider. She wasn't making work around herself and her colour, work to do with the medium, shot on 5/4.

John Hedgecoe made her leave the studio. Decided to photograph people's homes around the country, interviewed people in their homes, it was first time she had gone beyond the technical side of photography and more into storytelling and cataloguing. Degree show at Manchester had been about class.

Later, she photographed people's homes without them being there as a way of doing portraiture with all classes of people from different generations. At Manchester she had also done a series of interiors of Hulme, which would be like a historical document now.

[01:17:29] Joy liked people to be out when she photographed their homes so that she wasn't influenced by them. When she takes pictures, she starts off with a concept. At Manchester she would draw and plan her sets in her sketchbook and build them, but at RCA there was less space and this shifted her practice from building interiors, to finding interiors with which she could tell stories.

Once you were at the RCA it was less about being taught and more about following your own path. Thinks the courses are more structured now, you are taught. At the RCA you were left to your own devices at that time.

Joy dreaded her tutorials and crits. Remembers walking up Exhibition Road to meet John Hedgecoe with a sense of dread. Never talked about race, more about practice and interests. Joy thinks she worked like a fine artist and was told she was 'the last of the Impressionists,' probably because she was so far behind the modern world and ways of thinking.

[01:22:44] Joy didn't feel an expectation to work in a certain way, or to explore black history or identity then. Later, she felt there were expectations of what her work should be, but it was coming from other black artists.

The Black Arts Movement was founded around this time, with people from Bristol and Birmingham. She was approached by Keith Piper to be in an exhibition of black artists and submitted the work that she was doing at the RCA, which was related to interiors and still life. However someone on the panel was appalled by her work and sent it back, saying that the work wasn't 'black enough'.

Joy was outraged. What is black art? She wanted to tell them to piss off, she was angry, in the same way that she was angry with the careers woman about Woolworths. She felt they had no right to tell her to produce a particular kind of work. It was Eddie Chambers who sent back her work.

She thinks no-one has the right to say to someone that they should be producing a particular type of work because of the colour of their skin. The situation made her defiant, it made her want to buck the trend to make the work that she wanted to do, not what was expected of her. You shouldn't be

told that you have to produce a particular sort of thing because of who you are. Joy thinks you shouldn't have to represent anybody other than yourself in your work.

The comment made her furious, but it also made her think that these people were accepting racism by thinking that every one of the same ilk should be producing the same work. Although she acknowledges that this work is important, no one should have to do it.

Joy felt judged, that she wasn't black enough. It was horrible coming from someone who had had a similar experience, especially as there isn't one single black experience. Joy also points out that the people from this group had come from an urban black experience, whereas she had come from a more rural environment. Black people who grow up in places where they don't have other black people to relate to, have to make a different path and her black experience was very different to someone who grew up in Brixton, Bristol or Birmingham.

Joy's sister teaches in Birmingham and finds it very divisive. People of one cultural background have few friends in other cultures, it's like a cultural apartheid, which reflects on how you see the world.

In Joy's experience, she was trying desperately to fit in to something. So her path was different. When she was making pictures, it was about the medium, rather than about her experience. She grew up in the countryside and a lot of her work is about plants and botany, her parents were both keen gardeners.

[01:28:18] Recalls going to Johannesburg and listening to talk from a speaker from the UK, whose work explores plants and flowers. He made a statement that black people don't really and don't have a close relationship with plants. Joy challenged him, because she said, she comes from a culture where everyone had land and a close affinity to plants and this happens across the world. He replied that he is an artist and doesn't have to say that, because it's not his experience.

He was as a white artist being fated in Johannesburg and Joy was appalled that he was invalidating the experiences of black people. He also gets all the grants. Joy is always curious about artists who don't think they have to do any research. You can feel it and research it. Research isn't about looking in books, it is about feeling and listening.

[01:30:11] END