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# 'We haven't got here just on our own. It's a conversation': An interview with Carol Tulloch

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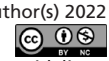

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## Abstract

Carol Tulloch is an author, curator, maker and academic, and Professor of Dress, Diaspora and Transnationalism at the University of the Arts in London. She grew up in Doncaster in the North of England and studied BA Fashion and Textile Design at Ravensbourne College Design and Communication, and MA History of Design at the Royal College of Art and Victoria and Albert Museum. She is known for her innovative work on heritage, personal archives, style narratives and auto/biography, and her books include *Black Style* (2004) and *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (2016). She has curated and co-curated a wide range of exhibitions, including *Grow Up! Advice and the Teenage Girl* (The Women's Library, 2002); *The March of the Women: Suffragettes and the State* (National Archives, 2003); *Picture This: Representations of Black People in Product Promotion* (Archives and Museum of Black Heritage, 2002); *Black British Style* (V&A, 2004*);* and *Rock Against Racism* (Autograph, 2015). In this interview, conducted online in summer 2021, she talks to Jo Littler about her work and the contexts and cultures it emerged out of.

## Keywords

Belonging, connections, conversation, difference, disconnections, dress, making, memory, style

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JL: You use material culture as a way in to telling larger social and cultural stories – pulling on their threads, and considering their meaning and significance in a sensitive and capacious fashion. How did you come to adopt this kind of approach?
CT: I've always been drawn to objects and clothes. I'm not quite sure how that came about . . . maybe going shopping with my mum and my dad as a kiddie. My dad used to back horses at the bookies, and he put some money on for me at the Grand National and I'd choose my horse. Once when I was under 10 my horse won, so I got some money, and so I knew exactly what I wanted to spend it on: a tweedy blue coat with a hood with fur round it that I'd seen in a shop called *Busy Bees*. Now I can remember my relationship with my dad through that coat: I can see us walking down the road to the shop. The other thing that made me realise I was obsessed with clothes was when a Sikh man from Sheffield used to come round and sell things door to door. I used to get really excited cos I always knew he was going to bring something amazing. Once he brought this amazing pair of jeans with deep turnups. I must have been about six or seven and *I got the jeans*! So there's certain images and memories.I remember in the early 1960s television was all so new and we had a TV and we watched a programme called *77 Sunset Strip*. The main character was a private eye played by Efrem Zimbalist Jr (and at that time in America, to have not changed your name to a more Americanised name was quite radical). His friend, Cookie, used to continually comb his quiff. I remember the action of him combing his hair, and then putting the comb in his pocket, and being just *enthralled* by that. Another memory is being by my mum's side and seeing a skirt or a dress with beautiful embroidery. My mum used to buy things and then send them back to the family in Jamaica. I remember her folding it up and putting it in a suitcase or a box. I've always remembered the colours – the reds, yellows and whites.

So a lot of it is to do with connections to my background and growing up. It was also because of dreaming about fashion design, then training as a fashion designer and working with material and tools for making – I am obsessed with them! I got into contextual studies at Epsom School of Art and Design where I did my BTEC.[1] Then when I went to Ravensbourne College for Design and Communication, and did the contextual studies course there between 1985 and 1988, somehow it all clicked: understanding how and why I use clothes as a way of making myself visible, of claiming my sense of self. I couldn't articulate that before.

My mum was quite religious after my dad died, and I really couldn't go to nightclubs or anything like that. I really wanted to be part of the black consciousness movement that was happening for us in the 1970s and that had started in the 1960s. I would do it by experimenting with head wraps, copying things I saw on *Top of the Pops* or on Black girls in London when I came down for holidays. I began to understand how clothes can communicate those ideas. Then doing the V&A/RCA History of Design MA course I understood how you can do a biography of an object, or figure out what an object can communicate to people.[2] Like us now really: bringing back memories, but also showing *evidence*. That's my curating.

I always used to think my curating wasn't 'political', it was just me trying to get across another truth, other than the historical colonial, imperialist 'truth' about Black people. Particularly by connecting with my familial heritage, and people in Jamaica; by connecting and telling another counter-narrative. Objects can help me do that. I didn't

have the academic language to communicate what I was trying to say before I really got into contextual studies and writing, and realising what I was doing was critical practice or critical thinking. Objects could communicate what I was thinking. Sometimes all you need to see was an Afro comb, which said so much for me. But then I needed to spell that out for others. So I wrote an article about the Afro comb (Tulloch, 2009), researched its history, and found all these patents for Afro combs that emerged in the States during the 1960s and 1970s.

So an aesthetic of presence and evidence is how it works. When I curated the *Black British Style* exhibition with Shaun Cole at the V&A in 2004 it was object-led and included quotes from lenders. When we put the objects on to the mannequins we realised the very first outfit – a 1960s suit by Julian Bridgeman – didn't have a shirt or tie. Then I remembered my dad's tie . . . he died in 1971, so it was from around the right time. That said so much: being able to state that he bought it in England, and in Doncaster, in the 1960s. Another example is my work on taste and the champagne cocktail glass. In the 1960s, my parents had a champagne cocktail glass that they did not use ironically: but they used it as part of their sense of taste, and as part of the act of kindness and wellbeing in having friends round. That cocktail glass was bought in Doncaster, so it wasn't aimed at the black community. But their purchase of it, and taking it into their home, this Jamaican home, added a different meaning; and the way they used it added different meanings from say somebody white from Doncaster (and a lot people around us were white working class). But it's the same object (Tulloch, 2018).

JL: How did growing up in the north of England shape your work?
CT: I am so proud to be Northern, I can't tell you, and I'm so proud to be from Doncaster. The neighbour who lived next door to us was Mrs Taylor, who was white, and then the family next to her was a black family, and after that all the rest were all white. Me and Mrs Taylor always got on and she taught my mum how to make pancakes and my mum showed her how to do jerk chicken. I remember her coming round one evening, and she came for my dad, and said that she had taken her husband his dinner and he wasn't responding. My dad went round; he'd died, and he had to get the doctor. But she came for my dad, a black man – or for our family anyway, rather than the white families that were the next door along. Do you know what I mean? And this is the 1960s.

There was a close black community, because the majority of the men who moved to Doncaster came from Birmingham. My uncle CB told me that they came to England when they were young and were given the choice of conscription or working down the mines, so a lot of them worked as miners. He and my dad chose the mines. House parties developed because there was a colour bar system, so you couldn't go into clubs and pubs. That continued and so we were always going to Nottingham, Birmingham, London, Bradford, to things, and then people from those cities would come to us. So there was that sense of community. But also, from infant school to junior school particularly, all my friends were mixed together. There would be the kids from the Barnardo's orphanage, and the lovely Scottish family who ran it. They came down on their way to school and picked me up, then we'd pick up someone else – including another guy who was Scottish who would always wear those very belted gabardine macs with a schoolboy cap – and we

would walk together. There were Romanies who would come to school on a seasonal basis. Sometimes people went back to places: a boy called Shanda Varga went back to Czechoslovakia and my best friend, at the time, Carol returned to Jamaica with her family. So I was seeing all these things – people, migrants and returning – quite early on. But in that mix of different groups . . . the one thing that connected us all was the working classness, sharing foods, eating gugelhupf, all of that.

I always remember someone at school saying, our world is within the school gates. Outside that world, how adults think is not how *we think.*[3] I did feel really safe within the school. I was also the first black girl to go to Danum Grammar School. That was tough, because I had to wear the same uniform I'd worn at my previous school because my dad died that year and my mum said she just couldn't afford the new uniform, so I had to wait to get the free one. That was painful. So on one level there was this great connection . . . and then on another level there wasn't. My mum went into school with me for the introduction to new pupils and she wanted to sit right at the front because she said she didn't want to miss anything and to get it, to understand it, so we sat at the front and the hall was packed, absolutely packed, so much so, . . . people were standing down the side of the aisles . . . And the other front row of the other side was full and ours was empty. No one came and sat with us. My mum squeezed my hand so much she was hurting me. And then we started going around the different rooms. I remember being in the chemistry lab and I saw this girl . . . she kept smiling at me. That was Christine Markham and she said she saw what happened that day, and she said that she made sure that I was going to be her friend. And I'm not kidding, I just got a card from her a couple of weeks ago, and she's saying to me 'Carol are you still working..?' cos she's retired. And I went 'yeah' [laughs]. So we're still in contact.

So even when my mum was squeezing my hand I couldn't really understand the times. I once went for an interview and someone said that 'the job has gone'. The agency couldn't understand what was going on. Then in the 1980s I was punched in the face . . . things had started to change and I arrived in Doncaster from London for a weekend at home and my sister picked me up and we were walking and I just heard somebody say 'black bitch'. The next thing I knew I tried to open my eyes and I couldn't open them because there was so much blood and he had punched me in the face. It turns out he went and slashed someone else's face – Michael Burt, a family friend of ours – in the Arndale Centre in Doncaster, so I could have got that. They finally caught him because he beat up a Romany man . . . I went to court, I couldn't recognise him because I actually didn't see him, but Michael did, and I think he got sent down. So by then I think something had shifted. But that's the foundation of me as well.

I was lucky to be brought up in the North and in Doncaster. When my dad died in the 1970s, I'm not exaggerating, it was 50% black 50% white at the funeral. There wasn't a West Indian club, so my dad used to go to the Polish Club on a Sunday – the Polish community was very close with the Jamaican community. So it's complicated, it's not straightforward at all. I think sometimes that's why I can look at things in the round. And one last story. My cousin Karen came up from London, and a friend of mine came round. Well, my cousin was in shock, cos she lived in Brixton at the time with my grandparents, and she said 'Carol, there's a white boy at the door!' And I looked, because in our house the kitchen was at the back of the house and when all the

doors were open you could look right down to the front door, through the dining room and then the hallway (and we had rooms coming off that). And I said 'yes, that's Chris'. Chris and I were born on the same day, we went to infant and junior school together . . ., he lived next door to the Browns who were a black family, so he was really close to them and us. And Chris had come in and said hello and things and went straight to the fridge and got something out. Well by this time, I thought Karen was gonna have a seizure or something, and she just kept saying '*but he's white!!'*. She could not believe it and then sat down and started chatting. In Doncaster there was such a mix of black and white.

JL: Your book *The Birth of Cool* interprets cool in different ways: as a condensation of histories of African diaspora, as spiritual balance, as a jazz ensemble. How does 'cool' work in relation to gender?
CT: I decided in the end to look at individual men and women that I was drawn to and had a connection with; at how they used clothing as a way of communicating who they are and expressing their particular tastes. So it ranges from Billie Holiday, and the world of jazz artists in the States, to Mrs Gloria Bennett, from Jamaica, who was a dressmaker with four children who worked on the buses in Doncaster. She's on the front cover of the book. Living around my mum and all her female friends, there was a strength that I didn't fully realize until I started reading about feminism and the idea of women having the right to work, to exist beyond the home and not just be defined as a mother and a wife. The women, including my mum, balanced so much: they were mums, they cooked and baked beautifully, they could sew, but they also worked – my mum worked in a factory.[4] Then they would go to parties and dress beautifully. I can remember my mum's dressing table and face powders and lipstick and the glass containers on her dressing table. There was a woman called Mrs Brown. When my dad died, she came to our house and they all did what they do when someone dies: lots of people come around and they stay up late playing dominoes and all of that and talking and drinking. And I was *transfixed* by Mrs Brown. She had, god, how many – six children? I'd never met her before, but she held the room. She had this way of telling stories that I'd only heard men do when my dad used to take me to the cricket. And I remember her telling this story, and she had the most incredible black dress on, just a very simple shift dress: she was quite meaty, but curvaceous, but she had this astrakhan coat with a fur collar. She was telling this story, and talking about a fight, so she's pretending like she was one of the guys who took off their jacket, and the way she did it – she was this really strong woman, there was such a strength . . . but then she looked so feminine, in the sense that her hair was beautifully done, it was straightened, and her dress was stunning, she had makeup on, but she was holding that room. I was transfixed by this woman. These women, who have all these different planes they operate on, all these different aspects of what it is to be a woman in the world. They weren't professional women – they worked in factories and things. It was that power of *holding the room*, I can't really put it any better.

That's the women. Then the men: I'm interested in the 'swagger'. On a black man, it's a little bit more powerful because of what it means. It's tough enough being a black woman on the street, but being a black man on the street, whether in Britain or the States . . . I used to fear if my brother came down to visit my younger sister and I in London

because he could be picked up just for walking on the street. It didn't matter whether you dressed well or not, it's the skin tone that's going to get you pulled over. But there is the courage, the way of basically saying 'we love clothes, and we enjoy clothes, we're *just wearing it*'. Do you know what I mean? That's why I included the Malcolm X chapter: because there was someone who first initially had a more criminal life and then became a Muslim, and who was both incredibly religious and political, but did not deny himself the act of looking good and used that as part of his honesty and respectability.

In Malcolm X's autobiography he talks about being in prison, and his brother comes to see him in a sweatshirt, and Malcolm's appalled because he feels that his brother's gone a little mad because he's dressing down. It shows how that sense of respect for yourself involves presenting yourself well. That's something that both my parents and the black community around me growing up would stress, because they felt if you didn't – if you went onto the street not looking well-dressed – then you'd just be attracting trouble, and you'd be perpetuating the stereotypical idea that black people are of a 'lower class'. That's why there was some of the contention between children and their parents when people started wearing dreadlocks. Like between my grandparents and my uncle. Oh my god! It was too much for them, because they just felt that they were drawing attention to themselves and for them dreadlocks were not about looking good, respectability and being a good citizen, if you like. You were going against the grain. But then a lot of the older generation also started wearing afros, which was again about black consciousness and a re-statement of blackness.

JL: On a programme on BBC Radio Four recently they had a man on who grew up in an Afghan refugee camp and he was saying that for him clothing was the way to resolve his post-traumatic stress – he said 'that's how I dealt with it, by dressing *sharp*'. It made me think about how in *The Birth of Cool* you talk about how dress can be a way to resolve contradictions.

CT: Yes! It's quite interesting because I do it now. I bought a yellow jumper during lockdown and there's days when I say 'I just need my yellow jumper today, it's the only thing that's going to get me through the day!'. Another time, I was in hospital, and there was six of us in the ward – all women – and then another woman came in. The first couple of nights she had the curtain closed but there would suddenly be this amazing smell of perfume. It turns out that she had only a few months left to live and the thing that kept her going was putting a little make up on. She put lipstick on every day and then she'd squirt perfume on herself just before she went to sleep at night. And we actually couldn't wait till she squirted that perfume because the whole ward smelled *gorgeous*. She said that she wasn't afraid of dying – she was white – who had to come to terms with death but was worried about the impact it would have on her sister. Then *my* sister came in, Elaine, who worked for Jasper Conran. And this lovely woman came over afterwards and said 'your sister just looked *amazing* in those clothes' and was asking about those clothes . . . This woman didn't have long to live. And her face! Elaine gave us such joy that day. So yeah, sometimes people see clothing as a trivial thing, but it's not. Like that guy in the refugee camp. In a book chapter (Tulloch, 1999), I write about how for somebody like Mrs Anella James who'd just moved over from Jamaica in the early 1960s to Leyton in London, into a new space

for her where she'd not established a home yet, what was left was *the way she dressed*. She had herself photographed in a particular outfit that she'd made for a wedding. So her body and her clothes and the way she styled herself was her home.

JL: You've curated and co-curated a wide and pioneering range of exhibitions about gender and racialisation, including *Picture This!* on representations of black people in product promotion (AMBH), *Black British Style* at the V&A, *Grow Up!* Advice and the Teenage Girl at the Women's Library, *The March of the Women* on suffragettes at the National Archive, and *Rock Against Racism* at Rivington Place.
CT: I gave a talk recently for the 'Race, Rights and Sovereignty' series at Glasgow School of Art and I thought: what do I want to talk about? And I called it 'Curate, reflect, write, write, curate, reflect, curate, write, reflect'. The title went on and on because I was saying they all go hand in hand – the curating and the writing and then the reflecting. As I said earlier, objects help me to communicate things that are difficult to say. Sometimes an object can do a lot of it for you. Although I've not been that comfortable with block-buster exhibitions. For a lot of people *Black British Style*, in terms of the actual space, was small, but for me was like 'oh my God, I'm so *out there* in the world!'. I do want to curate but I'd be really happy if only two people came. When I did *Advice and the Teenage Girl*, which I was invited to do at the Women's Library, there was a massive double page spread in *The Observer*. It was too much! I just went to bed. And I remember Caroline Evans[5], saying 'Carol, there are people out there who would kill for a quarter page, why are you different?'. But right then, I was felt too much *out there*. Then when I wrote 'Picture This! The Black Curator' for you and Roshi in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of* '*Race*', that was me coming to terms with things that had happened at that time and all the exhibitions I had done; and asking myself if I wanted to be seen as a 'black curator', and what that means (Tulloch, 2004).

It was on the strength of those exhibitions that the Women's Library asked me to curate *Advice and Teenage Girl*. I loved doing that exhibition, because I was bringing in all the things that I've done around the Archives and Museum of Black Heritage[6] as well as *Street Style*.

I wanted to say 'okay, if we're looking at teenagers, we're gonna have a mix of teen-agers, but we do it in a way that is natural'. Do you get what I mean? Rather than, you know, your black teenagers over there . . . and other teenagers there. So, for example, I included a magazine from the Royal National Institute of the Blind. The cover was so beautiful, it had an embossed face, but they'd coloured it. And I remember, somebody from a newspaper, whose name I will not mention but let's just say it wasn't *The Guardian*, was so excited about the exhibition, and then I showed her this item and she said, 'what do you want me to do with that?'. And I thought 'wow, wow', because that's normally what they would say about black people.

*Black British Style* at the V&A was a turning point. I enjoyed doing it, but it put me off doing exhibitions for a while, because the pressure of expectation, and the negotiation of what could be included was a bit much. But, because of that exhibition, Donald Smith the Director of Chelsea Space, said 'Carol, you've got the Chelsea Space Gallery to do whatever you want to do in it'. No-one's ever said that to me before or since! I knew I wanted to look at Syd Shelton's photographs on anti-racism that he put away around

1986 and never really showed again. So I took his photos to Donald to curate *A Riot of Our Own* and then, with Mark Sealy, *Rock Against Racism*, an exhibition at Autograph.

I'm writing a piece now for Alison Slater's book *Memories of Dress* in which I look back at the exhibition I did called *Handmade Tales: Women's and Domestic Craft in Britain 1840 to 2010*. Reflecting on that exhibition, I realised that I'd become a custodian of a lot of people's memories. A lot of them were personal objects and I got the lender to write captions that I would edit. So there was a lot of personal detail woven throughout the exhibition; and then layers of memories *within* the exhibition; and then my memory of the exhibition – all these different layers of memory. I thought the editors might think it was a bit barking mad but it gave me the opportunity to think – within today's lock-down context – about domestic crafts and what those women were doing. Madeline Ginsburg,[7] who passed away last year lent me a Jewish sampler with a psalm written in Hebrew on it which was translated into English on the same sampler. It was from 1840 so that was our earliest piece, and it was given to Madeline by her mother-in-law, so it was a family object. I loved doing that exhibition. I had pearly queen dresses, and embroidery from Ireland, and a rug from the Punjab that a woman had made for a dowry. It was such a wide range. Then this lovely woman came in, I'd given a tour around it, and it was a black woman . . . I'll never forget, she'd got her hair shaved really short and she'd put her arms out and she said, 'this is me!'. And what was lovely is that it wasn't about just blackness alone: it was about women who make things in domestic space. And she put out her arms and said, 'this is me' and I went 'yeah' (laughs). And it was worth it, the whole exhibition, just for that.

JL: You've often taken your academic work out into public spaces – both establishment spaces of 'high culture' and more 'everyday' places. Why do you do that kind of public outreach work and what are its challenges?

CT: *Nails, Weaves and Naturals* was brilliant and so successful. It was a one-day event on hair and nails at the V&A, with a photographic display of Black British hairstyles dating back to the late 19th century which lasted for a little longer. Over a thousand people came and around 95% were black; they came for that event and got themselves photographed. Then we took the photographic display to the *Afro Hair and Beauty show* at Alexandra Palace. It was amazing as the display was in the main walkway, like mini billboards where people came in, and you could see people walking and then do a double take and coming across to have a look. It was interesting to see responses in that space. The organisers invited us to put it on there as they just thought it would work. Because *Nails, Weaves and Naturals* was so successful, the management at the Archives and Museum of Black Heritage wanted me to redo the exhibition there at the gallery in Brixton. I didn't want to repeat it, because it had been done, so I thought, okay: let's focus on the tools that make the hair. What we were presenting at the V&A and the Alexandra Palace was the finished product. Here I decided to focus on the tools and the hairdressers and the spaces where the hair would be created. So I gathered a collection of tools, and smaller collection of the photographs, and put them in hair-dressers. It wasn't easy, it was a bit convoluted, but it was so brilliant. It was up to the hairdressers if they wanted to keep the photographs. Then in January 2016, Alison Maloney[8] devised a project called *Cabinet Stories* and invited six curators to

contribute with their own theme. Each week she would change the cabinet and put in the next curator's work. I was the first one and mine was on flat cloth caps. Allison wanted to show the *Cabinet Stories* in non-gallery spaces, and so it was shown at Holloway Women's Prison just before they closed it down. It involved a mix of objects: actual flat cloth caps, 19th century photographs, *carte de visites*, a record sleeve. Each curator did a workshop around their display; mine was getting the women to stitch onto a segment of a flat cloth cap. They could either keep it or hand them in, then we'd create a flat cloth cap out of it.

There were warnings that the women might not turn up on time but my god, they were there so early, they were chomping at the bit outside. They were really lovely, and we weren't allowed to know their names, only numbers. I took bits of stitching that I do myself: I took in the quilt that I started the night my mum died, just to show them the stitching on that, and the kind of things that have influenced me. I said 'look, I'm not a professional textile artist or anything, it's just something I like to do on the side'. But I showed them how to do couching and cross stitch and experimental stitching . . . using those two stitches. And there were two young women from the Philippines who were absolutely brilliant and worked together as a team wanted me to show them how I did the cross stitch and they made a whole cap in the workshop time, all hand-stitched with embroidery. Then there was this one woman who looked incredibly stressed, and she was saying that she was going to leave, but then she produced a piece of stitching that Allison and I were crying at because it was so incredible. Somehow her face didn't have any features at the time when she looked so stressed, but when she got into the stitching . . . you know, she just wasn't going to go anywhere. And then she handed in her piece and she walked away and then she walked back and she said, 'can I see it one more time?' And it was so beautiful what she'd produced, I'm not just saying it . . . it was so beautiful. And then I saw a face and she had blue eyes. She looked younger and she was beaming and it was at that point as she'd turned away, Alison and I started crying, saying 'oh my God, today was unbelievable, unbelievable!'

JL: A therapy session.
CT: I know, it was a therapy session! It made that day for me, it was incredible. The other thing I've done more recently during Covid is set up a group called *Making Time*. I sent an email to six colleagues because I was just not finding time to *not* do academic work and I went 'you know what, Tuesdays 5:30 to 6:30 I am stopping and I am stitching, doing, making something'. I said 'look, if you want to join, if you just want to sit there, if you want to stitch, anything, cook, whatever'. We'd just meet for an hour online. The first one was on the 10th of November and we're still going. It's been phenomenal. We're a mix of more established academics and new researchers and administrators and some are now using what we talk about in their teaching. It's expanded my thinking on things. Some people have been baking or making bread, and I painted the drawer that a local man made for me because the drawer of a second-hand table I'd brought was missing. I have a new studio, so in one of those sessions I was just folding up my things and taking them up and putting them in my cupboard. Caryn Simonson said 'it's like an art piece, it's like a performance'. And all of us say: 'there's work *before* Tuesday, and there's work

*after* Tuesday'. I've not missed any sessions because, you know, I organise it. But some of them who had other things on and missed sessions, they say their week feels out of kilter when they've missed a session, which is very interesting.

JL: At your inaugural professorial lecture at Chelsea a few years ago you ended by talking about gender and grime and showing the video for Skepta's *Shutdown.* What interests you about gender and young people's clothes and lives at the moment?
CT: I remember Aleisha Dixon saying, at the end of her lip sync of *Shutdown* on the TV programme *Lip Sync Battle UK*, 'this is the only time I could do this'. She was going back to her roots in hip hop, in black music, as a rapper.[9] When I saw Skepta's video it was all in code: the all-white and all-black tracksuits, about belonging and unity. What did it mean for a large group of young male and female people of colour performing in the Barbican Estate? As Skepta said, 'Shutdown was a triumphant return of the repressed'.

The fear of the black gang is about a group of black men being together. But my dad and his mates used to be a group when they'd walk to the Town Fields in Doncaster to play cricket. And my brother and all his mates would walk along the streets, and if my mum got off the bus, they'd more than likely be so supportive, help carry her bags – do you know what I mean? I wanted to use such images to ask 'what is a gang?' and to look at the broader meaning of gangs, and groups of people together, whether young or old, regardless of age. So many times I've said to students 'OK gang', because we're this group together. The parents or grandparents of the Skepta generation would have got the same sort of treatment, of being feared, but they would have been older – more like in their 20s. So we need to look again at the term 'gang'. The 'gang' is so often presented as only about violence.

JL: You've said you're more of a womanist than a feminist. Can you say why?
CT: I do remember my mum using a similar word. If you were trying to be more adult before your time, my mum would say 'you're too womanish, you know!', or 'you're just trying to be too expressive'. I knew what she meant, in a sense. But it's the Alice Walker definition of womanist, that she initially aimed at black women, and what that means. I think with 'womanist', Alice Walker is basically saying 'fight for the rights of what and how a woman can be and what she wants to do, but if you want to look stunning and wear clothes and wear make-up you don't have to compromise'. I first read *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, in 1993: Alice Walker's determined fight to be who you want, who you need to be, regardless of the obstacles that emerge, that are constructed, to halt that progression. Womanism is a part of feminism for Alice Walker, and her use of 'womanist' connected me with my mother and paternal grandmother who were being womanist although they did not have a name for it. *Black British Feminism*, edited by Heidi Safia Mirza, helped me develop my thinking on what it means to be a black woman who challenges social, political and cultural obstacles, and then of course Chimamanda Nozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*. And in 2003, I curated the exhibition *The March of the Women: Suffragettes and The State* at the National Archives, Kew, London, which was my support of women's rights, regardless of class, ethnicity and 'race'. But it was the invitation to contribute an essay to the Tate exhibition catalogue 'Lubaina Himid' in

2021, that framed another shift for me in this context of womanist/feminist. Lubaina shared with contributors the last line of Mary Oliver's poem *The Summer Day*: 'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' If ever there was an unflinching question as a call to action, to pause, really think, what do I want? How am I going to pursue this? There is no time to delay. Let nothing stop you. For a woman in her sixth decade to be moved by such a questioning, encouraging, statement is profound.

JL: You were photographed for *Phenomenal Women: Portraits of UK Black Female Professors*, an exhibition that appeared outdoors on the Southbank in 2020. How was that?
CT: Oh my God! I couldn't believe it when the email came through. I had my photograph taken at Chelsea College of Arts and there was a launch in the City of London. We hadn't gone fully into lockdown but it was beginning. People were not shaking hands. I remember there were a couple of people I met in the lift and we all got on really well. The room was so beautiful. And these were all professors! It kind of took your breath away. I was really nervous because I wore trainers as I thought it was a regular opening, and it was a little bit more formal. I'd worn a really nice coat-dress but I'd worn my trainers, so I got upstairs and I thought, I should have dressed up more, with some decent boots on or something. There was this lovely woman, Professor Marcia Wilson, who's at UEL, who said 'Carol, you have earned the right to wear whatever you want to an opening!' (and she's not even working in dress). I said, 'you're right!' There was this other woman and we got on really well and we sat together.[10] I said 'what are you in?' Turns out she was an engineer and in space technology and had worked with NASA, and she said 'what are you in?' and I said, 'I look at dress and style . . . ' (laughs). I kept thinking, 'I shouldn't be here'.

A lovely part of the event was that they interviewed three professors[11] about their experiences. One was in dentistry.[12] She talked about how she'd got children and didn't want to move, but if they weren't moving her on, she would change jobs. She said 'you have to have breaks and time and space to reflect and to do your research because that's the reason why you entered academia in the first place. You've got to have that space'. She said 'you can now get a lot of information out much more quickly . . . .how do you do that, and not just make it all about journal articles?'. They talked about learning how to do that, how to still produce the journal articles alongside doing valuable things that would not be recognised as REF-able and such. Another said 'take breaks, and choose your battles, because they will impact on your wellbeing'. The third said that she was put on a committee and they'd shown her a budget sheet and she couldn't understand any of it, so she went and did a business degree to understand how it works. So she emphasised getting yourself prepared and knowing what you're talking about. She wasn't talking just about being black but also about being a woman within academia and how you're treated within those spaces. So that was quite interesting. Before that I'd felt imposter syndrome but after the interviews I felt much more at home. Then they unveiled the photographs. That was incredible! I still can't take in that it happened . . . there were a lot of people whose work I'd read there, but not spoken to . . . and I just kept meeting all these amazing women.

There was an atmosphere, I can't tell you, that was just . . . lovely! Everybody was chatting and swapping details. It was really nice. But it did come out of the blue.

JL: That reminds me of how you're always spectacularly good at crediting everyone else who's contributed to ideas and projects.
CT: (laughs) Honestly, I sometimes read people's things and I go 'I know exactly where they've got that from, and they haven't credited that person'. It makes me so annoyed. You know, we haven't got here just on our own! It's a conversation. I try to remember those things. The textiles course at Chelsea have a new newsletter and they asked members of staff to talk about a book that meant something to them. I chose James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*. At Ravensbourne, when I was asking for books to do with black history during writing my BA dissertation, a librarian gave me this book to read and told me to come back to him when I'd read it. I adored it! I wrote for the Chelsea newsletter that what I took away from it is that's it's about difference and its complexities, but also talks about those complexities in an accessible way. It taught me that I can write in an accessible way, and get those issues across without using academic terms all the time. That changed my life. It wasn't until years later I found out from Lee Wright[13], my contextual studies tutor at Ravensbourne, that the librarian, John McVeigh, who was gay, used to test students out and give them books, and you passed the test by reading the books. Then you were in his good books. So I passed the test, came back in two days, and he got me all the books I wanted and then recorded things for me and all sorts. I believe he became Head Librarian at Glasgow School of Art. I've never forgotten John and that book. I just think . . . we're not alone.

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## Notes

1. An educational qualification in the United Kingdom
2. V&A/RCA: Victoria and Albert Museum; Royal College of Art; London.
3. Jane Batram.
4. My mother worked at Crompton Parkinson, Doncaster.
5. Emeritus Professor Caroline Evans, fashion history and theory specialist.
6. The Archives and Museum of Black Heritage, AMBH, a short-term project that was the partnership between Middlesex University and the Black Cultural Archive. It was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.
7. Madeleine Ginsburg was a pioneering curator of dress, notably at the V&A Museum.
8. Alison Moloney, is an independent fashion curator, writer, lecturer and consultant based in London.
9. *Lip Sync Battle UK* is a television programme.
10. Professor Dorothy Monekosso
11. Professor Funmi Olonisakin, Professor Cynthia Pine and Professor Tracey Reynolds.

12. Professor Cynthia Pine
13. Dr Lee Wright now at Liverpool John Moores University

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## Biographical Notes

Jo Littler is Professor of Social Analysis and Cultural Politics at City, University of London, and an Editor of European Journal of Cultural Studies. Her interviews with feminist academics, including this one, are being collected into a book.

Carol Tulloch is Professor of Dress, Diaspora and Transnationalism at University of the Arts, London UK. Her books include Black Style (V&A, 2004) The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora (Bloomsbury, 2016) and *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life After Bourdieu* (Routledge, 2018). Her many curated and co-curated exhibitions include *Grow Up! Advice and the Teenage Girl* (The Women's Library, 2002) *The March of the Women: Suffragettes and the State* (National Archives, 2003); *Picture This: Representations of Black People in Product Promotion* (Archives and Museum of Black Heritage, 2002) and *Rock Against Racism* (Autograph, 2015).