

# **From Punk to the Hijab: British women's embodied dress as performative resistance, 1970s to the present**

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## **Volume II: Appendices**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements of the Royal College of Art for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2013  
Royal College of Art

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## Appendices Introduction

In this Volume (II) I include information about my interviews (Appendix 1) and two transcripts from each case study as samples (Appendix 2).

This thesis has used oral history as a primary source to bridge the gap between traditional histories and embodied experience. In my thesis Introduction, I discuss how I use this method to critically examine dress in terms of women's empowerment and self-expression (see Introduction, Volume I). In each case study I draw on the aspects of alternative style in terms of agency; often this presents a positive view, not because I intend to idealise the style of my interview participants, but because through oral history I am concentrating on how my participants interpret dress and style in terms of their own self-conscious identity construction. With my emphasis on embodiment and the description of feelings, emotion and memory, which more formal documentary sources may fail to acknowledge, priority is given to participants' subjectivity and senses of freedom. For the most part, these issues are commonly interpreted positively.

Furthermore, in order to best reflect my participants' own reflections and thoughts, the interviews were conducted as a series of conversations rather than as a question-and-answer session. When I first made contact with each participant, I introduced myself and then described my project and research question in broad terms. During the interview, as the transcripts show, we approached my themes in a fluid and far-reaching manner. Though I would initiate the conversation with questions, or ask questions along the way, or for clarification, I would also let the interviewee direct the discussion and raise points that were interesting or important to her. At times this

involved talking about issues that might be considered ‘off theme’. In Valerie Yow’s 1997 article about oral history methods and dynamics, she says that a new oral history ‘paradigm [...] permits awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content.’<sup>1</sup> The interactivity of oral history is what makes it different from straightforward interviews, which are usually created through interaction drawing only on another person’s questions that focus on a particular experience or phenomenon.

In contrast, oral histories deal more broadly with a person’s past, and range widely over many different topics.<sup>2</sup> Linda Sandino, when drawing a comparison between interviews and oral history, says that the latter ‘focuses on people in order to understand them as subjects in the socio-historical contexts of the immediate past or the present.’<sup>3</sup> In some cases feminists have coined the term ‘phenomenological interviewing’ to encompass oral histories as investigations guided by the interviewee’s lived reality.<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of my study I felt that using open-ended questions to probe aspects of a participant’s narrative would maximise discovery and description. I therefore used the term ‘oral history’ to encapsulate in-depth, interactive conversations. This aligns with feminist research methods that have highlighted the importance of locating the researcher firmly in the research to avoid hidden processes of exploitation and misinterpretation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much?” Effects of the oral history interview on the interviewer and vice-versa’, *Oral History Review* 24:1 (1997), pp.55-79 (p.79).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Perks, and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*. 2nd ed. edn (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Linda Sandino, ‘Oral Histories and Design: objects and subjects’, *Journal of Design History* 19:4 (2006), pp.275-292 (p.275).

<sup>4</sup> See Shulamit Reinharz, and Lynn Davidman, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.21.

<sup>5</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck, and Daphne Patai, *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991); Susan Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon, *Women’s Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press; Chesham : Combined Academic, 2003).

The transcript quotations in each of the chapters have been written and presented exactly as they were spoken; that is in the style, manner and rhythm of the participants' speech. When quotations from transcripts have been entered into the chapters, grammatical issues, repetitions or inconsistencies have not been edited. Sometimes I include my voice in the conversation as part of the quote and, as discussed above, to give an indication of my questions and my tone and style: to deliberately show my presence in the discussion. I contend that since the participants' speech is part of their embodied expressions, their actual words, phrases and pauses need to be presented as fully as possible. Sometimes sentences are long and unwieldy, at other times they are broken. Nevertheless, the interview quotations are presented intact. The analysis in the body of this study mines the quotations, both short and long. These form the critical primary source for this analysis, and I draw from and interrogate the material produced through oral history both analytically and theoretically. It is in this way that this project contributes to scholarship that seeks to 'recover' women's voices and histories and to challenge meta-narratives.

# Appendix 1 Interview participants and information

## Chapter 1 The Punk Cut, 1975-79

### **Case study participants**

#### Caroline Coon

Music journalist, *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker*, 1970s and 1980s, London. Author of *1988: the New Wave Punk Rock Explosion* (London: Omnibus, 1982).

Interview date: 24 November 2011.

Location: participant's studio, Ladbroke Grove, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours and 13 minutes.

#### Helen Reddington

Punk musician in Joby and The Hooligans, 1976-77, Brighton; then a punk musician in the Chefs, late 1970s and early 1980s, Brighton.

Currently Senior Lecturer, School of Arts and Digital Industries, University of East London. Author of *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

Interview date: 16 November 2009 and 4 December 2009.

Location: coffee shop, Barnet, London.

Duration of interview: 16 November 2009, 1 hour and 20 minutes; 4 December 2009, 1 hour and 40 minutes.

#### Michele Sedgwick

Punk in Leeds, late 1970s and early 1980s.

Interview date: 29 November 2008.

Location: participant's flat, Moorgate, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours.

#### Lucy Whitman

Musician with The Neons and creator of the fanzine *Jolt*, 1977, London.

Interview date: 30 November 2009.

Location: participant's house, Haringay, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours and 12 minutes.

### **Academics, journalists and others**

#### Teal Triggs

Associate Dean, School of Communication, Royal College of Art, London. Author of *'Do It Yourself' Girl Revolution: Ladyfest, Performance and Fanzine Culture* ([London]: London College of Communication, 2009); *Fanzines* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010).

Interview date: 12 November 2009.

Location: participant's house, Battersea, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours.

## Chapter 2 The Greenham Layer: 1981-86

### ***Case study participants***

#### Paula Allen

Social documentary photographer currently based in New York, USA. Photographed Greenham Common Peace Camp by visiting and living at the camp between 1981 and 1987.

Interview date: 24 February 2009.

Interview by telephone.

Duration of interview: 2 hours.

#### Tish Harrower

Lived at Greenham Common Peace Camp, 1984 to 1985, mainly at Blue Gate, then visited sporadically.

Interview date: 4 February 2009.

Interview by telephone.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 50 minutes.

#### Beeban Kidron

Film director. Lived at Greenham Common Peace Camp for approximately seven months, 1982.

Director of *Carry Greenham Home* (Contemporary Films, 1983); creator and editor of the Your Greenham website for the *Guardian* <http://www.yourgreenham.co.uk>

Interview date: 13 March 2009.

Location: Cross St Films, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 5 minutes.

#### Rebecca Johnson

Lived at Greenham Common Peace Camp, Yellow Gate, 1982 to 1987.

Interview date: 4 March 2009.

Location: National Portrait Gallery Café, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours.

#### Sasha Roseneil

Lived at Greenham Common Peace Camp, including staying at Green Gate, for just under a year between 1983 to 1984.

Currently Professor of Sociology and Social Theory in the Department of Psychosocial Studies and Director of the Birkbeck Institute for Social Research at Birkbeck College, University of London. Author of *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995); *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham* (London: Cassell, 2000).

Interview date: 12 January 2009.

Location: café, Wellcome Trust, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 40 minutes.

#### Elizabeth Spring

Lived at Greenham Common Peace Camp for periods between 1982 and 1986.

Interview date: 20 February 2009.

Location: participant's workplace, Kensal Green, London.  
Duration of interview: 2 hours.

#### Mandy Walker

Lived at Greenham Common Peace Camp, at Yellow and then Blue Gate, for nearly two years from 1983 to 1985.

Interview date: 27 January 2009 and 5 February 2009.

Interview by telephone.

Duration of interview: 27 January 2009 1 hour and 30 minutes; 5 February 2009 1 hour and 17 minutes.

### **Chapter 3 The Hip-Hop Break: 1984-1997**

#### ***Case study participants***

#### Kym Mazelle

Member of British hip-hop group Soul II Soul, c.1989-98. Born in the United States.

Interview date: 9 February 2011.

Location: Home House, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 9 minutes.

#### Maybelle Peters

Self-identified hip-hop fan, 1979 to present. London.

Interview date: 16 November 2011.

Location: Digital Media Lab. Royal College of Art, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 5 minutes.

#### Debbie Pryce

Member of Cookie Crew, a London-based hip-hop group, 1983–92. Also known as MC Remedee.

Interview date: 3 December 2011.

Location: pub and restaurant, Clapham, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 20 minutes.

#### ***Academics, journalists and others***

#### Shaun Cole

Course Director, History and Culture of Fashion and Fashion Curation, University of the Arts, London. Author of *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); *The Story of Men's Underwear* (London: Parkstone, 2010).

Interview date: 1 March 2011.

Interview by telephone.

Duration: 40 minutes.

#### Carol Tulloch

Reader in Dress and the African Diaspora, Camberwell College of Arts, London.

Author of *Black Style* (London: V&A Publications, 2004).

Interview date: 9 March 2011.

Interview by telephone.  
Duration of interview: 20 minutes.

## **Chapter 4 The Fold of the Hijab: 2001 to the present**

### ***Case study participants***

#### Jobeda Ali

Social business entrepreneur and former director of social enterprise Fair Knowledge  
Wore hijab from the age of fourteen until her early twenties (1990s-2000s), Tower Hamlets, London. Background: Bangladeshi.  
Interview date: 4 September 2009.  
Location: Fair Knowledge office, Shoreditch, London.  
Duration of interview: 2 hours.

#### Jihan Jamal

Hijab wearer, (born 1987), London. Background: Eritrean.  
Interview date: 28 July 2009.  
Interview by telephone.  
Duration of interview: 43 minutes.

#### Sarah Joseph

Editor, *emel* magazine. English convert to Islam (converted at sixteen years old, in 1988).  
Interview date: 21 July 2009.  
Location: *emel*, Finchley Road, London.  
Duration of interview: 1 hour and 4 minutes.

#### Nadia Solkar

Hijab wearer (born 1985), Blackburn. Background: Bangladeshi.  
Interview date: 14 July 2009.  
Interview by telephone.  
Duration of interview: 30 minutes.

#### Annika Waheed

Hijab wearer (born 1984), London. Background: Pakistani.  
Interview date: 20 July 2009 and 9 October 2009 and 12 May 2010.  
Location: 20 July 2009, café, Swiss Cottage, London; 9 October, 2009 friend's house, East Ham, London; 12 May 2010, Hampstead Heath, London.  
Duration of interview: 20 July 2009, 40 minutes; 9 October 2009, 1 hour and 30 minutes; 12 May 2010, 2 hours.

### ***Academics, journalists and others***

#### Sara Wajid

Freelance arts journalist and editor of [www.untoldlondon.org.uk](http://www.untoldlondon.org.uk), a Museum of London website.  
Interview date: 26 August 2009.  
Location: café, Museum of London, London.  
Duration of interview: 63 minutes.

## Appendix 2: Interview transcripts

### Chapter 1 The Punk Cut, 1975-79

#### Caroline Coon

Interview date: 24 November 2011.

Location: participant's studio, Ladbroke Grove, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours and 12 minutes

Start

- Suterwalla: Well thank you again for taking the time to talk today.
- Coon: Yes I didn't get the name of – are you writing the – I don't think that I saw the actual name of your thesis. What is the long – you know the full type –?
- Suterwalla: The long title is 'From Punk to the Hijab: British women's embodied dress as performative resistance'.
- Coon: Great. 'From Punk –'?
- Suterwalla: 'To the Hijab' – as in the –
- Coon: Yes, yes, yes. To – 'British –'?
- Suterwalla: 'British women's dress as performative resistance'. It is 1970s to present.
- Coon: This is very interesting because I have often – I had already equated in my own mind and sometimes in discussions that teenage, young teenage Muslim women wearing in the hijab is a punk statement. You know as complex as that. How –
- Suterwalla: Yes well that is what I –
- Coon: How – hold on, '70s to present day.
- Suterwalla: So what I am doing Caroline is at style and how it influences women's, British women's identity politics; I'm wondering to what extent we can

explore identity politics in Britain street style and the layering of different styles. My four case studies look at styles that have been considered oppositional, though I'm trying to move beyond typical or common terms.

Coon: Interesting thing but I – is it just a generational thing? Why are you, as a matter of interest – why are you missing out the hippie resistance of the 1960's?

Suterwalla: Because I think that that – that seems to me to be quite different in that punk was much more of a rupture in my interpretation of punk, towards the postmodern and the interpretations of the postmodern. What I do is I look at punk and then women who went to Greenham Common Peace Camp. Then I look at Black women in hip-hop in the '80s and '90s.

Coon: I would like, just for your information, would like to say that I think that that is a real mis-reading of history. One of the reasons why 'hippiedom' is getting written out of these cultural studies I think is because it was the first teenage international youth rupture; but it was also the most successful. In other words the anti-establishment, anti-gender apartheid dichotomy; anti-office work. And I think especially as I am – can I say I am talking to a British born person whose roots are in Asia, one of the things that hippies did was to reject Christianity and the whole ethnic feeling of the hippie movement 'look' was a reaching out for a spirituality which was different to Christianity. That velvet flowing and that ethnic look was rupture of Christianity; or where the British identity was against racism reaching out to different cultures. It is interesting that this – the whole serious political rebellion of hippies seems to be being erased. You know, I know it is not part of your thesis, but there is a little touch of it in –and that kind of interests me. That is actually where in a sense modernism began, in every branch of the art; in writing, in movies, in –

Suterwalla: Do you mean postmodernism or modernism?

Coon: Well you know to a certain extent these labels which are kind of academic labels sometimes don't refer to the actuality of what was happening at the time. So whether you call it – you know – post the Second World War, when a lot of socialist politics was beginning to democratise culture. Working class people were beginning to get purchase within what was considered to be elitist forms. For instance in the '60s you couldn't have a working class accent on the BBC. A really significant change happened, but

then you have got the backlash against everything that hippiedom stood for. Ecology was first mentioned then. I – so you know using – marking punk as a significant first rupture, I think misses out hippies. Because in fact you can't – my thesis would be you can't understand punk unless you see punk as a generation's rejection of hippiedom. Punk doesn't mean anything unless you see it as a rejection of hippies. So if you try to – if you just try to look at punk out of context it kind of – I don't think you can get an actual purchase on what punk was about. Everything that those early punks were saying is that 'We are not hippies. You hippies failed.' Very interesting because they were reading the backlash against hippies in the tabloid media as signifying the failure of hippiedom. I would maintain and I think I am right now, because everything that hippiedom stood for is now mainstream. But the virulent backlash against promiscuity, gender blur. Sexual – it was called promiscuity, liberation was so demonised by the tabloids it made it look as if hippiedom had failed. In fact the vehemence of the tabloids against hippiedom is a measure of hippiedom's success. So –

Suterwalla: Yes, that can then be applied to punk of course the vehement –

Coon: Exactly. You see I would say that if we are looking at the eruptions, the general eruptions by young people then it happens time and time again. Because you know why does the establishment react against youth? I would pose it that politicians need an enemy in order to make themselves relevant. If you – you know politicians can do it two ways. You either have the enemy abroad, which you go to war against, or you manufacture an enemy within our midst. You can read the politician – I mean Margaret Thatcher would actually talk about 'the enemy within'. That seems to – you know that is always young people. I mean just as a matter of interest you can read Roman scripts about each generation demonising young people. But is it so? Yes, it happened to hippies it happens to punks. Then to a certain extent if you are reading it on, you could read the shock of teenagers wearing the hijab –

Suterwalla: Yes I'm very interested in these ideas. But is it the tabloid led moral panic that partly that gives currency to the way that the hijab is received as oppositional? I'm interested in the complexities of these processes.

Coon: It is complicated. But listen – what was the shocking piece of garment that the punks wore which caused absolutely horrendous outrage? What was it?

Suterwalla: One piece? I think about the safety pin when I think about –

Coon: Try – and I want to know –

Suterwalla: Torn clothes, no. Safety pin, no. Bin bags -

Coon: More than that, more than that. More outrageous than that.

Suterwalla: Hair. No. What did they wear? T-shirts with slogans that were -?

Coon: More – yes.

Suterwalla: Androgyny?

Coon: No, no, no. I don't know whether it is because for instance when my punk book, when I did my punk book a picture I – a couple of pictures I had in the book which had this piece of clothing on it. My publisher told me to erase it. It was the swastika.

Suterwalla: Yes, right.

Coon: Okay. So you know – so punks were trying to shock by using a sign which was absolutely as fascist as – disgraceful to me as a feminist - could read the hijab and the burka -. You know maybe we would get on to that – because I will –.

Suterwalla: But in your opinion why were punks wearing that, due to –?

Coon: Punks – to shock.

Suterwalla: Were they showing that a sign could be appropriated? Was it connected to a rejection of British government policy and foreign policy? An interjection in what had happened historically.

Coon: I don't think it was – I don't think it was – these are –

Suterwalla: These are interpretations that I have come across in some of the secondary literature.

- Coon: We're not talking about adults. These are 19 year olds, 16 year olds who absolutely probably had no idea – who had very little grasp on the Second World War, had never seen – they had no real idea what it was about.
- Suterwalla: But from what I have read the interpretation seems to be that a) that swastika was used by Vivienne Westwood and McLaren. That it wasn't necessarily used by other people who were detached from the London scene. So although it is iconic it is not representative of what punk women wore in the everyday necessarily. Unless they were part of that set.
- Coon: The only reason that it didn't gain purchase was because there was absolutely – there were powerful enough people who oppositionally stopped it. So when Malcolm McLaren dressed Siouxsie, gave out these swastikas – he was an adults. A Jewish man as a matter of fact. So wanting the publicity of shock, or so thinking that shock was the way that you drew attention to yourselves. Gave out these swastika armbands. There were enough -
- Suterwalla: As in McLaren.
- Coon: As in McLaren. So there was this very complex kind of – right anyway. Check that down but I – anyway. But there were more conscious political people around that said – i.e. The Clash – to Siouxsie, 'You can't use our equipment if you wear this –'. So there were enough people to say – to condemn it. In America it was much more frequently used. In America if you are looking at any punk literature, fanzines, the swastika is the icon of American punk. They are so much more removed from Europe to – not to realise how absolutely shocking. Do you know where the swastika is illegal?
- Suterwalla: Where?
- Coon: In Germany.
- Suterwalla: Right.
- Coon: So this is interesting you know, what is legal, what is not legal? So whereas the swastika is absolutely illegal, you would get arrested for wearing the swastika in Germany, maybe for obvious reasons. Although you are not arrested for wearing a swastika on the street in England the social –

- Suterwalla: It is enough of a taboo?
- Coon: Yes, for instance when Harry dressed up as a – Prince Harry dressed – you know. You completely prevent it from happening.
- Suterwalla: I mean the social policing around things like that is very interesting.
- Coon: Yes so if you are maybe kind of like reading across that to the shock of hijab –
- Suterwalla: Yes.
- Coon: But I don't know whether you want me to just blather on about that or -?
- Suterwalla: Could you finish that quote because it is so interesting. Then if I could direct you back a little bit towards talking about punk women and dress.
- Coon: Well you know if you are reading that across and you know, when I am seeing – when I started to begin to see very young women wearing the hijab, the burka just with a – is that the niqab actually? Rather than the – the niqab with the slit. Kind of it was an absolute shock. Because I am of a generation that read a lot of Egyptian writers or Egyptian women writers in the 50s. You know, my teenage years were very admiring of that generation of Egyptian or North African women, who were talking about how wonderful it was, how liberating it was not to wear the niqab. To me the niqab has always been an absolutely fundamentally sexist garb. But then kind of thinking 'What is happening here with these younger women?' Thinking well – you know, 'This is the – this is youth identity politics'. As shocking as the hijab is - and to me it is disgraceful and I am shoulder to shoulder with the women who argue against it – I could kind of empathise with how three...say, sixteen year old women walking down the high street would kind of relish the shock of it.
- Suterwalla: Yes and as you say, I'm interested in how it connects with classic forms of identity stereotyping. And can we draw some connections between the shock of the hijab and the strategies of the youth and subcultures since the '60's if you like, since the '50s.
- Coon: Absolutely. Yes, but to me there wasn't enough – because it was the younger generation who were telling other younger generation kids 'Don't

wear the swastika because it is so indicative of fascism, of racism.' Really it is a political sign of a really inhuman ideology.

Suterwalla: So when McLaren put that on Siouxsie, what was Siouxsie's reaction?

Coon: She wore it.

Suterwalla: Did she – were you there at the time?

Coon: Yes, yes. But then she took it off.

Suterwalla: Did she not say anything about it?

Coon: You see this is the –

Suterwalla: How did he approach – did he just sort of say 'Here this is what you are wearing tonight.'

Coon: Yes, 'This is free – this is shocking'. You know, 'Wear it'. Wow! And everybody 'Oh! The shock swastika, 'Oh let's wear the swastika it is very shocking.' Because everybody knows that if you shock you draw attention to yourselves. So it was a shock against all the common decency values of the generation who fought the war would stand for. This was a generation who was going to react against their parents, their elder generation.

Suterwalla: And Siouxsie's reaction was just to put it on?

Coon: She took it off again. When she was given a consciousness raising argument for why she shouldn't wear it. But I think also she was being given it by a – and this kind of fits into you know the more contemporary outsider Muslim groups. She is being given this sign by people who have money. So she has been given the swastika by somebody who is going to offer her perhaps rehearsal space. Or perhaps offer to buy the band a drum kit. So I am saying that I – you may correct – well I would presume that a lot of youths who are wearing what I would consider to be a sexist fascist sign – i.e. the hijab which is sexist, because the men don't have to wear it. But they are - you know they are not being given it without something offered as well, which could be just the succour of the mosque. So I don't – this is an ideology which has been sold with a lot of collateral value. Health care, community centres, acceptance. And with the political ideology which is oppositional to

– you know the debauched west or whatever. So the burka to me is a big mishmash but it is not surprising. I mean you could – there is a reason why it –

Suterwalla: That is a really interesting and fascinating argument. The way that it actually comes - all that other stuff and I had not realised that Siouxsie was being given that stuff. So McLaren was saying: 'Wear this and then listen to me and I will then help you get all your stuff.' Is that what you mean?

Coon: It is very difficult for young people to say 'no', to adults who are powerful. It is a kind of adult grooming. You know when you are 19 and you are a woman in a band and the newspaper says 'Why don't you wear a bikini'. It is very difficult for a 19 year old to kind of stand up to those adults and say 'No, that is not what I want my image to be.' So he was McLaren who was like the King – one of the kingpins, the kingpin manager. [?? 0:21:11] oppositional to Malcolm McLaren who could say 'No.' But you know, there was what is a counter balance to that. But it is very difficult for young people to say 'No,' to adults who are offering them advantages.

Suterwalla: So when she put on things like – I have seen pictures of her at the Screen on the Green wearing sort of – it looks like rubber or PVC cat suits but one leg is bare, and she looks as though she is bare-breasted, she has some sort of straps coming across her shoulders, and she's wearing boots, to me her dress seemed quite abject. It is quite sort of bringing in notions of carnivalesque, horror and stuff like that, but that's my reading – would you agree?

Coon: Sadomasochism?

Suterwalla: Yes. Is it looks like that too? Or was she -?

Coon: I think that is quite interesting because I think that is a little bit more – Siouxsie has an older sister. This was the beginning of the second-wave feminist movement...Because of the '60s one of the things...that shockingly happened to women is that we wanted to be sexually liberated but had no idea what the private sexual life of men was.

When the men wanted to be sexually liberated it came with a kind of a package of – I am going to put 'perversions' in commas. Which we as kind of naive young women had no idea about. We thought that we were just going to be sexual and liberated and passionate and loving, and adoring our

naked bodies. But the men were saying ‘You have got to fuck pigs, you have got to dress up as dominatrix and beat us’. ‘You have got to want to be tied up in handcuffs’. It was a real shock. So a lot of women – how do we negotiate that? If we say we – if we withdraw it leads us down the repressed...you know – and we don’t like that kind of sexuality it leads us back to the burka. A tactic is to say ‘Right. If you men are going to want us to dress in this hypersexualised way in sadomasochism—we are going to bring it out of the closet. You can’t do this in the privacy of the brothel, or in the privacy of your own bedroom. We are going to own it. We are going to wear it on stage and we are going to drag it into the open.’ So it is a very...punks wearing that sadomasochistic, S&M gear, it is a very complex game to play.

But I maintain that women had very little choice. There was... the scope for argument was so narrow ... so feminism had a lot of narratives. You did have the ‘earth mothers’. You did have feminists – you had the puritan feminists, you had the sadomasochistic feminists. You know. So there is a whole lot of different tacks against the double standards of sexuality. So within Siouxsie [Sioux] wearing – you know a lot of women wearing – owning that sadomasochistic abasing—so-called abasing...to enter that abasement area, that perversion area—was one of the narratives that had to occur. It is only when you brought it out into the open and wore it that you can then decide what to do about it.

Suterwalla: But what did that mean for the way that she was received by men when she went on stage? Did that bother her?

Coon: Listen, women learn that whatever we wear we are going to be objectified until the law is changed. So the idea that women in the niqabs aren’t objectified is the – that is the way the argument goes. Nothing that women can wear – if the war, either secular or religious turns women into second class citizens – nothing women can wear can stop you being objectified. For instance one of the most famous posters of the hippie era was a nun lifting up her skirt. So given that we are going to be objectified the whole – I would say the revolutionary tactic of women in their clothes, is to say ‘Whatever we wear that is not an excuse for you to rape or abase, or abuse me’.

Suterwalla: When she walked on to stage in those clothes, could you describe atmospherically what the reaction was?

Coon: It was thrilling. The reaction was thrilling.

Suterwalla: For her?

Coon: To her. But remember when she first went on stage she had to have an absolutely ferocious attitude. At that point she didn't know how to sing. She had never stood on stage. So she is acting a strong persona.

Suterwalla: Isn't that punk? I mean isn't – that is the –

Coon: Yes. Exactly. That is it.

Suterwalla: That is the 'doing' punk.

Coon: You have to take on this – as a –

Suterwalla: You don't need to know how to sing.

Coon: No you do – no. This is another big mistake which that generation of women made. All the – when you are a 19 year old boy and you have only been learning the guitar for six months, you are not going to say 'I can't play the guitar.' You are going to say 'It doesn't matter that I can't play the guitar I am going to bloody well go on stage and use four chords.' I don't want – I am not interested in technique. I don't care whether I can play or not. That is what the boys – how the youths, the boys, were fronting it out. However they went back home and practised like mad. So within two years or within a year of those boys saying they don't care about technique –

Suterwalla: So is this The Clash and The Sex Pistols?

Coon: Yes. Then they don't care about technique – they cared profoundly. But you don't as a 19 year old admit your incompetence.

Suterwalla: So all the braggadocio.

Coon: You brag it out. But the girls and young women, unfortunately to my mind bought that idea and so the young women – the musicians didn't get as skilled quickly enough – as quickly as the men. The women – because we don't know male culture, you know you don't really – when you are a

young woman you don't understand the extent of the braggadocio of male culture. You think that is – that their male confidence is given. You don't – you have to be a little bit wiser as a woman to realise the extent to which men front it out. The whole of male culture actually –

Suterwalla: So what you are describing to me at that time was – speaking specifically of around '76. That it seems that it is very, very gendered. Men and women are very separate.

Coon: It is the first teenage generation that have experienced the first glimmering of feminism. They have mothers who are beginning to take on the feminist language. Remember – but feminist texts aren't becoming mainstream. I mean Germaine Greer's book for which I am – she dedicated it to me – was '71, '70?

Suterwalla: I'm not sure.

Coon: Yes, so it is almost as if the women haven't got the language with which to debate this. You know, you are coming 30 years later. There is a whole academic ball work. For us women – we didn't have the language even. But we are beginning to develop it. One of the key words of the hidden movement was 'unisex'. So it is there with the backlash beginning against women who dare strive out for equality is ferocious. People don't realise how vicious the backlash was. So yes, punk was gendered. But there are women in the vanguard who are trying to break the – who are really trying to break this down. The journalists like me were – one of the things that we were saying to the men – you know saying to the men 'Do you – what is your – what is your view of women wanting to go on stage?' People like Hugh Cornwell saying 'You women can't be in bands.' There was – or 'Women aren't good enough to be in bands. Women can't play.' Well what about Joni Mitchell? 'She is an exception.' What about Janice Joplin? 'She is an exception.' So only until was it four years' ago, five years' ago, 2005 where there was a critical mass of women musicians, 50% of the charts are women. You don't hear that discourse anymore. You don't hear that – it is taken for granted that 50% of the makeup of pop music for instance will be women in the West, anyway. It has taken a long time to kind of – to break down those huge sexist barriers.

Suterwalla: Can I ask you very, very specifically just – there is loads of stuff to cover. But when – the men and women it seems both used similar dress tactics for

punk style. So for example taking on clothes and destroying them was a unisex tactic, it seems to me. Using dirt and mutilation and safety pins and tearing and ripping clothes was also –

Coon: Listen, it wasn't necessarily – that tearing and ripping is to do with poverty. These were kids that are living in squats. What is happening is not that there is tearing and ripping, but the clothes are torn and ripped already. You are only going to tear and rip something which becomes then a kind of a fetish...But the initial... their clothes were already torn and ripped. One of the differences for me was why punk was so liberating was because what was happening in the hippies' era... that women were having to sew up all the holes in jeans. You were wearing – poor – young people are on the whole pretty poor.

Countercultures of ...working class people can participate in counterculture because it is not elite...What the hippies were doing... they had girlfriends who were embroidering the holes in their jeans. What was liberating about punk was that you didn't have to embroider them anymore; you just left the holes there. So it freed up women to become punks. You don't have to sew up all the holes in your second-hand clothes. You just can safety-pin them up. Which is one of the iconic contrasts between hippie jeans and punk trousers.

Punk trousers...you let the poverty show with safety pins. With hippie jeans you embroidered it in a very ethnic beautiful kind of embroidery.

Suterwalla: What was the difference between male and female clothing?

Coon: It was –

Suterwalla: And what did it mean in general?

Coon: It was how the icon of how the gender specific pieces of clothing got exchanged.

Suterwalla: Could you explain -?

Coon: Yes. So that where the youth – where the boys were wearing those kind of kilty kind of like skirty things and the girly kind of maybe the sort of frilly blouses...the girls were wearing Doc Marten boots with their skirts. So

there was a real kind of gender blur by the crossing over of gender-specific articles of clothing. Like the make-up, the hair dye.

Suterwalla: Did the men wear make-up?

Coon: That – men were wearing make-up – the girls were wearing Dr. Marten boots with their skirts.

Suterwalla: So it was less androgyny and more cross-dressing?

Coon: All of it. I think you could say it was all in the mix. But this was the second bash that young people had had. The first bash was where hippie men tried that with their long hair and were put back into suits and short hair so quickly. You know it was hippiedom's long hair and effeminate velvet dressing that punk then morphed into mohawks and leather-clad aggressive, harsh, anti-social style.

Suterwalla: The men?

Coon: The men. So they were avoiding the accusation of being gay or homosexual which was such a – it was – people forget to read that. Calling men 'gay' and 'homosexual' was as inhibiting and as annihilating as calling women 'sluts' and 'whores'. So the establishment was casting these names on the women who were out for sexual pleasure and the men who were trying to change their – the kind of men that they wanted to be.

Suterwalla: So it seems that punk dress for men was about opening up gender roles; opening up gender?

Coon: I would say it was more – it was about strength and I don't think that you can see clothes out of the context of the time. You – looking back you could almost see the politics of the hippie era as a kind of – there was – the statistics are quite interesting about the employment after the war. It was quite easy to get a job; you could go to a job to job. I was going from bedsit to bedsit. But in that early – from '70 to '75 the environment was – and so okay in the '60s you could dress in a more flowing velvety way. The environment wasn't quite that harsh. Okay we did have anti-war demonstrations. There was a war in Ireland and abroad. But in the hippie era – in the punk era the war came home. The war was a politics destroying the work opportunities of the working class. So wearing those leather clothes

and those bovver boots, to me is symbolic of protecting yourself with your clothes against a pretty hard and ferocious environment. So clothes through history have always been a kind of indication of what the environment is. You could take that right the way back to very primitive human beings using Lévi-Strauss here. I always thought that was very interesting, how human beings and their environment, when they are putting tattoos on their flesh, if you are an American-Indian. That is to try to distinguish yourself from the environment. So you are looking at clothes. It tells you a lot about the environment that you are living in.

For instance I was discussing with a friend –he bought a perfume the other day – Fracas by Robert Piguet. I said ‘Hold on a second. Who is – I don’t know whether Robert Piguet was a couturier.’ We looked him up; yes indeed he was taught by Dior. We just – we looked at the clothes and there was simply no way that the modern young women could possibly dress in that manner. The way that those women were dressing – they had to be wives, kept women. So if you are wearing those absolutely couturier gowns you had to be wealthy. So that I think if you are looking at punk clothes you are looking at the – you know, it is a reflection of the environment as much as it is an inflection of breaking down gender roles.

Suterwalla: I am really interested in how the dress for women was different as a kind of process of subjectivity versus punk dress for men.

Coon: I think women – it was different because I think women are trying to break down differences by demanding to have the same liberation in dress as the men had. This was the first generation that were experiencing the first glimmerings of women’s liberation. Because the working classes is very far away from positions of power. They were more able to dress in trousers than women close to power are. Or for instance if you go the – you know if you go to the stock exchange, if you work in a bank, close to positions of power, the women aren’t allowed to wear trousers today. So the process of liberation was being acted out through the fact that punk women are going to wear trousers, they are going to wear boots. They are going to wear leather jackets. All the clothes that enable men to live – to live liberally in the world. For instance on a motorcycle. So I think that – and the fact that women were demanding –

Suterwalla: The men weren’t wearing these sexualised clothes. So the torn fishnets –

Coon: You are wrong. Excuse me, what is a sexualised garment for a man? What is sexual – what is sexually valourised in men? What is the most sexual sign of a man? Strength. I would maintain the way men exhibit their sexuality is by looking strong, wearing leather jackets, wearing broad shoulders. They advertise their sexual strength by their financial prowess. So men are flashing their sexuality all the time in the way that their culture enables them to. Actually one of the things that were happening in the '70s that women were beginning to be able to use that kind of commercial work place professional success, to sign a different kind of sexuality. Plus they were using their commercial success, so that when they were wearing miniskirts or very naked clothes, they actually had the financial resources to protect themselves. So they are going to be able to say 'We are going to enhance our sexuality, be hypersexual, wear our miniskirts. But fuck off because we have our own money. We can protect ourselves. We don't need to be under the guardianship of our boyfriend, our brother, our father.' Very liberating in British culture for young women to earn their own – to be allowed to earn their own money.

I mean you can look at the law to find out for when women were actually allowed to own the money they earned. Not – almost within one's own lifetime. Was it 18 something when -? The Equal Pay Act is coming in. So women are beginning to have the finances of – with their own resources so that they can be hyper sexual without quite so many of the disadvantages that they used to have. One of the things that women are still trying to work out now is how to protect themselves from rape. Men have – well I was going to say men haven't had to deal with that. But one of the things I say to men when they are saying – 'Aren't you afraid of being raped?' Well actually more men get raped than they would like to – if a man isn't walking down the street at night looking adequately strong he is very vulnerable. But men don't talk about that as much.

Suterwalla: So the hypersexual dress you are saying is connected to the fact that in a way women are – because of the general politics at the time, coming out of the domestic space; laying a claim to the potential for equality. They feel it is closer than ever before. It is the element of self-sufficiency, or the idea of being self-sufficient that enables them to start to adopt things that previously they would have had to either deny completely, or keep private?

Coon: Or ask permission for.

Suterwalla: Or ask permission for, right, okay. The men meanwhile are highlighting poverty and sort of socio-economic status who had also –

Coon: Well the lack of it. Because in fact career opportunities - one of the big first biggest punk songs is that men - that working class youth boys are being – not disenfranchised – losing their economics. They were losing their economic – what is the word for it? Losing their economic value, which I think is you know –

Suterwalla: And yet the –

Coon: ‘We are the flowers –’ Johnny Rotten ‘We are the flowers in your dustbin.’ Those punk youths were – they thought of themselves as yet another – in their own terms ‘We are the generation that you have thrown aside.’ One of the things that people forget and maybe we don’t – but one of the things that I think it actually quite - goes into the suicide bomber, which was the male equivalent of the niqab, hijab. One of the things that kind of astonished me, but kind of touched me tremendously, looking at that very early generation of the first manifestation of punks was that the kids were coming slashed. With their bodies slashed with razors, with blood. Their faces were – they were bloodying themselves. It was kind of like a self-mutilation. Kind of like a living suicide.

Suterwalla: What was that about?

Coon: Anomy. A sense of - in the classic sense of what ‘anomy’ is. I am trying to think of who I was reading at the time about anomy...I was reading about suicide, you know the roots of youth. So a feeling – no agency of being left on the scrapheap, of feeling unconnected. You know, burning themselves with –

Suterwalla: This was at gigs?

Coon: Yes this was – as I say they were use –

Suterwalla: Fans would turn up –

Coon: There were kids coming with their shirts covered with splashes of blood. So the kind of - the self-mutilation where there were kids who were using their self – the cigarette burns – as a kind of badge of pride. Kind of the–how

heroic youth is trying to negotiate how to have some purchase on the adult world. This kind of trauma that teenagers repeatedly...have to go through. So that was the razor blade.

Because the razor blade is also another – so the swastika, the razor blade, the safety pin. Piercing their flesh in order to feel – ‘If I can’t express myself in my job; if I can’t express myself in having an emotional reward, through achieving something, even if it is being able to empty a dustbin really well. I am going to try to get my feeling, my sense of life from cutting myself.’ Which has a kind of – you know which we slip really into kind of like the psychology of pain and disenchantment. Which I think slips into – I think the teenage suicide bomber is reflected in many different youth cultures.

To characterise the Muslim suicide bomber as exceptional is made, when you think of the suicide bombers that were happening in the ’70s. The Baader-Meinhof gangs, the Red Brigades, the Weathermen. You know there was always groups of teenagers that would take their ideology to the extreme. To the extent that they are going to –

Suterwalla: Were women feeling that as much as men then? It seems like the sexual politics with women was different because of the women’s liberation movement. I mean weren’t women feeling all hopeful and men feeling nihilistic? Is that a divide or not?

Coon: Yes brilliant. Very – yes. The nihilism and the kind of the idea that the world is coming to end, which is a narrative right the way through quite a lot of the men that are writing about – I mean I am writing an alternative piece to Dick Hebdige.

Suterwalla: Really?

Coon: Yes, but you know the next time I get asked to do a – talk at any university it is going to be an oppositional to Hebdige, who is kind of like –

Suterwalla: Yes...

Coon: Because those –

Suterwalla: Well that is what I am – in parts. I mean much of –

Coon: Yes, because it is interesting. The female narrative is that the revolution of feminism to me was the most enduring and human rights centred narrative. It is ongoing but it is incredibly successful. But it – for the working class male who presumes that they are going to liberate themselves from working past them and then inherit the privileges of patriarchy. To find that patriarchy is in fact being challenged and all their privileges are being dismantled. My God, they are going to have to share these privileges with another class of person, another gender, other species of person, is a very – was a very demoralising shock. A lot of these men –

Suterwalla: Hence the sexism in –

Coon: Hence the backlash. Sexism was in punk, it was very –

Suterwalla: Yet meanwhile the women are not feeling that there is no future? Is it that they are feeling that there is very much a future that they are creating for themselves in a sense.

Coon: Absolutely.

Suterwalla: They are getting up on stage and they are doing it for themselves?

Coon: Well except that the backlash against those women was ferocious. So that group of – that vanguard of women musicians, lady writers and everything else, that came up in the '60s they were really – the classic thing that happens to women. They were silenced. Have you read the classic thesis on silencing women? Generation of women after generation of women get silenced. Anyway so the punk women weren't given any valorisation within the music press. Were treated as sex objects in a very horrendous way by the record industry. After four or five years of trying they kind of dropped out. If you read what was said about Debbie Harry or – you know we were terrorised out of the workplace.

Suterwalla: So you writing about those women at that time –

Coon: We were terrorised –

Suterwalla: You were obviously trying to write about women and about the –

Coon: That was my mission in *Melody Maker*. I was writing about the women. But we were all terrorised –

Suterwalla: By your editors. By who?

Coon: Well for instance there was just a common or garden sexual harassment at work, in the workplace. You couldn't walk into the workplace without getting booed, jeered. It was very – the vanguard of women who were –

Suterwalla: Punk didn't change that?

Coon: It began to.

Suterwalla: Wasn't that the whole thing with Siouxsie and the rest of them getting on stage and –

Coon: But you don't – I am 66 and I am seeing another revolution in – people thinking 'Well in six months we are going to have a revolution. It is going to be –' But it takes a long time. It is gruelling. To make those changes is gruelling. Certainly it helped to shift things. I could maintain that if punk was the first youth movement where women – there was almost a critical mass of women in the vanguard of that movement. You know, there has always been a third of – in any movement there has always been a third of the women and they were written out. The backlash tried to write women out of punk. If you are reading all those male books, the women are written out. It is only when Dr Helen Reddington 30 years later began to look back and say 'We are alive today – our history has been misrepresented.' There are those white males writing this history and not valorising – that the women get put back into that history. All those punk bands were disappeared until another – a new generation of women like Courtney Love, Kurt Cobain – listened to the records again with a fresh ear. Instead of those journalists, those male journalists at the time saying 'These women are crap. They are hopeless.' After – I tell you, if you are a musician, for five years those music journalists telling you 'You are crap,' it gets very disheartening. You might kind of want to – you get silenced. So there was another generation that came along after. What would you call the generation after punk?

Suterwalla: Well...

- Coon: What was the American word for Courtney Pine and Nirvana? The 'ex-' what was the – the 'ex-generation'?
- Suterwalla: I'm not sure...
- Coon: So they discovered these – listened to the music, didn't have the baggage of the sexist critique and brought them all back. You know began to listen to them and valorise that music for another generation. It was – women began to be putting women back into the narrative. But you know patriot and sexism is very, very – it has been very difficult for everybody to break it down. But the advantages have been absolutely magnificent.
- Suterwalla: One of the things that I thinking about very hard in the chapter is this idea of the cut. I am thinking about calling the chapter the 'Punk Cut'. What you have said has been really helpful because of course there are pictures of women of that type with safety pins in the noses. I haven't seen any pictures of women cutting and slashing themselves elsewhere, or covered in blood. But I know that there was an incident – was it Siouxsie showing menstrual blood or something on the stage?
- Coon: That has been a tactic of advanced women for a long time.
- Suterwalla: That was much more rooted in the sort of –
- Coon: That was the agenda of all – to bring what women are. With our blood, with our menstrual flow. For instance who was the first person who was pregnant on 'Top of the Pops'?
- Suterwalla: Neneh Cherry.
- Coon: Exactly. Showing your body form. Being unashamed of what you are. Using Tampax earrings is a whole thing. Absolutely that was –
- Suterwalla: I talk very much about that when I go on to write about the Greenham Common Peace Camp. That was very much a case of bloody tampons put on the fence etc. But one of the things that I think is really interesting about what you have said is that the men were cutting themselves to bring about a sense of agency in what they were feeling. There is a world that denied them agency, because of – it denied them opportunity. It seemed to me that the women's use of the punk cut is much more generative and creative. Does it

in any way connect with the idea of them going off and creating brand new identities for themselves that hadn't necessarily existed before in history of that period? Also that they were then applying it –

Coon: Absolutely. They were. They had all – I am only picking you up there because to say these were women that were doing it for the first time in history – I kind of choke on that because it denies all the great women historically who have absolutely been in the vanguard doing that and who have been erased repeatedly. There were incredible music women musicians, incredible women artists.

Suterwalla: And with punk it is so visible and it is loud and noisy.

Coon: Because of feminism. Because they were the first generation, the '70s that were informed by a theory of feminism. Because of the – what happened in the Second World War when thousands of women actually went to work in factories. So these are mothers that have actually been in the work place; been in the armaments factories, done the land army – done the jobs of the men when the men were at war. Coupled with just the Western progress of all fronts. Medicine, technology, the human rights agenda that is beginning to be formulated as a result of people thinking 'Never again are we going to allow human beings to kill each other like this in concentration camps,' for instance. So a lot of things are kind of piling up. So by the '70s when teenage women are beginning to kick again against the restrictions there is a – there is beginning to be a whole body of pharmacology, everything else that is – which is going to lift – give them a little bit of a lift. The law is changing; abortion is legal – if you can find a doctor. The pill is there. So there are a lot of – on every level, things that enabled the punk woman to be more visible, more protected; more independent than any generation of human beings on earth at any time.

But it was done on the backs of – on the shoulders of some very courageous women and some very hard work. It still goes on. But you are right, that was – there was – women were participating in a real revolution which was going to work. It was equalist. It – whereas the leftist males, their ideology of communism had failed. So if you look at –

Suterwalla: So is that what the no future was about for the men? What was the – because there has been quite a lot of theorising about punk and nihilism. But what was the sense on the ground at that time with regards to that?

Coon: The nihilism was –

Suterwalla: And a different gender –

Coon: The nihilism – the male nihilism was absolutely to do with the fact that the perception was that the progressive ideals of the hippie movement had failed. I am not quite sure – what date did the Vietnam War end?

Suterwalla: '73 or '75, I think depends whose history!

Coon: In other words, so this was a generation who had seen their elder brothers, their elder sisters push for this really incredibly progressive idealism of ecology, gender blur, jobs for everybody; the end of racism, the end of the domination of the church; the end of inherited authority, the end of privilege. There was a sense that all that had failed, because those kids were reading that from the tabloids who were saying that it had failed. The tabloids at that point believed that the churchmen, the establishment was going to rule. So the nihilism came out of that – you know. I see that – it is nihilism is a sandwich between hippie ideology and then the next great ideological movement was hip-hop. So I do a kind of like – put the three – you see that is why it is interesting that you are going 'punk', 'hip-hop', 'burka'.

Suterwalla: I am going 'punk', 'Greenham', 'hip hop'.

Coon: This is the thing because I would go 'hippie', 'passive', 'passive idealism'. Punk is destruction – you know is nihilism. Hip-hop is aggressive idealism. So hip-hop had the power. They were militaristic but they also had a really interesting agenda, an ideology. So that nihilism of punk, I mean it was –

Suterwalla: But the gender difference is fascinating to me. For women it was actually...can we say, hopeful?

Coon: Yes. But you know it is overlaid. There is no – it is complicated but there is that narrative that is –

Suterwalla: Yes can you talk me through the complications please, I really want to understand these. I want to come to lived experience. Obviously I wasn't there at the time and I am really fascinated by the actual gendered lived

experience for women. There was so much sexism as we have commented on. It was difficult to get on stage and it was difficult to get the equipment. As a woman you still were objectified even though you were having this kind of sexual gendered revolution. Have I got that right?

Could you describe the sort of every day to me? Talk to me about how dress and make up and body and embodiment would have played a part in crossing boundaries and pushing boundaries from traditional positions?

Coon: Okay. As a woman – you are talking about me, from what I felt?

Suterwalla: And your perceptions about yourself.

Coon: Well for instance at that time I was reviewing concerts. Or - at that time if you wanted to walk down the street at night or if – the whole of a woman's life outside the home is negotiating male violence of various kinds; subtly or explicitly. It is almost like women take it for granted that they have to adhere to all these rules. You couldn't go to a pub – women couldn't walk into a pub – you can't walk into a pub alone.

Suterwalla: Why? What would happen?

Coon: Well because you would be sitting – it was not respectable for a woman to go out alone. You would be up to nefarious things. If you were out alone you were obviously looking at an excuse to punish the women. Obviously if you were out alone you were out looking for sex. As a woman on the street, if you stopped at 11 o'clock at night after a gig and went to hail a taxi you couldn't stand on the street for two minutes. Somebody is going to come up to you and make a lewd comment, or approach you or accost you. What you used to do as a woman was have to move. Get out of the way of trouble. Just avoid trouble. I remember I was given a leather jacket.

Suterwalla: Who by?

Coon: I was given a leather jacket by a male friend. Second hand – I was wearing this leather jacket. It was a complete change of clothing for me. I had been wearing 40's glamorous dresses and hippie flowing things. So I wore this leather jacket and I have reviewed – I think it was Simply Red. I am standing outside The Apollo Theatre, Hammersmith, trying to hitch. Three guys came up to me and are going to stand and get their rocks off by making

insulting language to me. To my amazement I just lifted up my leather clad arm and whacked the man across the face. They disappeared. I hadn't moved – it was a wonderful revelation to me about clothing and armour and standing up against bullies.

I hadn't moved a foot and it was the first time in my life where I hadn't had to relinquish territory in public space for a man who demanded it. It was absolutely – so that was happening. The fact that those women were wearing – and I am going to kind of project that feeling to the women that were beginning to think, 'My God we can wear Dr. Marten, steel capped shoes. And if we go to a gig and some idiot – we are going to kick him in the balls. So that was happening all the time; those little consciousness things.

Suterwalla: So it was almost about – like getting men out of your space. Creating space?

Coon: Yes. I am allowed – girls are – and people sneer at the way some of the vanguard sentiments from advanced art then gets kind of popular and mainstream. But I loved Spice Girls, Girl Power, Girls Aloud. Thank God. I am not a snob about that. These advanced positions are coming into the mainstream and hurray.

Suterwalla: What did women behave like at gigs?

Coon: The same as the guys. But I think this is an interesting –

Suterwalla: But what did that mean for the men? I mean that must have been quite unusual? To behave the same as the -?

Coon: No, no, no.

Suterwalla: I mean you are not allowed in a pub, but suddenly you are at a gig and –

Coon: Ah, but listen. This is one of the things – because I always was more interested in pop culture than actually rock and roll culture. Pop culture is where teenage girls are enabled to be free. So if you were in to rock and roll, as a teenage girl you have gone to rock and roll gigs where you have screamed your little heart out. Being noisy, laying on the pavement, peed your pants, expressed yourself, being sexually aroused. So to a certain – if that is then crushed out of women once they leave that teenage arena. So I

think women are quite – in that arena of popular music, I think women have had an experience of being very overt because of their experience. The bands at the time would have been Bay City Rollers. Because a kid – you know the women punks would have been – what were the pop bands that they were listening to? Bay City Rollers, maybe Slade or what are the other -? You know they had been through that teenage time. So at gigs that was female space, the teenage fan. I mean the reason why lovely boy rock and rollers couldn't be out and out gay is because that would cut down on their teenage female audience.

So the managers won't allow your boy pop bands to join in this kind of like – the gender blur. 'Pop-dom' was female territory. So I don't – so in the gigs young women knew how to behave. Except that there is a slight difference when men begin to express a kind of a physicality of the mosh pit, which kind of drove women to the sides of it. But that is a – it is a little bit of a different. You know when –

Suterwalla: That was specific to punk then in that -?

Coon: But as I remember it the actual gig was a very liberating space.

Suterwalla: Right, can you say more about liberating space and the gobbing and all of that at a gig? A punk gig?

Coon: Hilarious.

Suterwalla: Everybody did. Both genders?

Coon: Absolutely hilarious. It was –

Suterwalla: That must have been liberating for women.

Coon: You know there was that kind of impolite –

Suterwalla: You are peeing in your pants and gobbing and -?

Coon: Yes, impolite behaviour. Which is breaking the rules of what the good teenager is meant to do. Very liberating. Getting drunk, spitting, gobbing. It was just – it is what all human beings should actually go through because

then you can moderate your behaviour in due course. But the part of the joy of being a teenager is that you can do these extreme physical behaviours.

Suterwalla: What about the sense that this was working class and white? Ethnically white?

Coon: There has always been racism in this country obviously. But it is not legally in force. But you have to actually understand funnily enough - it was only until I went to America where the population – with the population – a percentage of black/Hispanic people is so much greater. But because the music that the original punks admired was reggae, because it was – reggae had an element of physical protest, there was always a great kind of feeling that one wanted to break down racial barriers.

Suterwalla: Why does Hebdige concentrate so much on it being white then?

Coon: I think structurally it is quite – it is – Hebdige, or some people aren't very good at doing what I would call a conceptual analysis. It is a very definite white story. But the black, racism and sexism – you keep having to dip out of the narrative and it is structurally quite difficult. You keep having to – you know, to dip out of the narrative because there is another narrative going on. You know there is another rhythm.

Suterwalla: That of ethnicity, is that on the agenda?

Coon: That agenda. You can write a white narrative and you can talk about – but Rock Against Racism came about. That is a continuation of the hippie narrative which was also very much trying to break down whiteness. In a one – one was listening to the racism, the vicious racism was happening in the States. You were seeing those images of black people being, you know – we were aware of it. But as a matter of fact, unless you lived in certain parts of town, I lived in Notting Hill which was a poor mixed race community. But you know you could live in England and not see a black face. That is why we kind of used to get very upset when there were these big concerts. Because at the end of the punk era there was the –

Suterwalla: Rock Against Racism.

Coon: What was the big one at Wembley? Bob Geldof did it?

Suterwalla: Oh, Live Aid.

Coon: Live Aid. No black bands on it. There were many of us that thought it was absolutely outrageous. But Rock Against Racism really tried to get black bands involved. There really was –

Suterwalla: So the reality at gigs was that there was mixed – was it mixed in terms of race?

Coon: No. As a matter of fact, because – As a matter of fact, if you liked reggae it was quite a stretch to like punk music. If you were listening to the great reggae musicians why would you go to a punk gig, to listen to kids only playing four chords? Lots of us admired that. But if you had access to the shebeens and the black clubs where the music was formidable, superb, could be political too. So to try to get black youth to come to the 100 Club or the Roxy Club - not in a million years. It was a very difficult ask. Who was – some black youths did do it. I am trying to think of Isaac Julien. Do you know who he is?

Suterwalla: The –

Coon: Filmmaker.

Suterwalla: Or Don Letts?

Coon: Exactly. Well Don was doing the soundtrack. Reggae was the soundtrack to early punk. Before the punks got their music on vinyl, the music that they were listening to and being inspired by was reggae.

Suterwalla: What about class then? Middle class, working class? Again Hebdige's whole thing – whole thesis is that it is just working class.

Coon: It certainly was. Because one of the great revolutions of the Second World War from the '45 onwards was going to be a white, working class revolution. Because that revolution was so successful, that white, working class revolution was so successful. On all levels it was a generation of young, white men; working class, white men that have had access to university, became famous photographers and became – you know the '60s was a white, working class revolution which was absolutely successful. So to become – if you were going to be a revolutionary youth, you would take

on the manner of the revolutionary youth which was working class. So that all the middle class or upper class youths who were going to join in rock and roll, the rebel rock and roll would put on a working class accent. Listen to Mick Jagger. You know that –

Suterwalla: It is street, isn't it?

Coon: Yes so that street language was –

Suterwalla: I mean you get it with hip-hop.

Coon: It was a disguise. Who is the bishop's son? What is his name – one of the original white hip-hop DJ's?

Suterwalla: Oh, yes. I know who you mean.

Coon: It is a horrible paradox. But the DJ that is able to get hip-hop onto the BBC is white, who speaks – it took a lot of – it took quite a while for people to realise that whatever his name is was actually putting on that street accent. He was a white guy who was the son of a bishop. But he has – so you know, there are all these interesting things that – anyway. So you would have to pretend to be working class if you were going to get any credibility as a rock and roll rebel. But the Pink Floyd – you know there was always – culture, it goes right across class. But because it wasn't so very cool to be middle class or upper class as a rock and roller, you would down – you would have to just pretend.

Suterwalla: What was the difference between the punk that was being created from the art school influence and the underground cinema versus working class punk?

Coon: Well you couldn't get more working class than Johnny Rotten and he was at art school. In those days you didn't have –

Suterwalla: Were there complications with this idea of authenticity? Because of course from the academy and other writing about subcultures and punk and all that, Hebdige and his crew were writing about it of course, this idea that punk was about creating an authentic Other to the mainstream. I am interested in this idea of how is it that authenticity got played out?

Coon: What is inauthentic?

Suterwalla: Well he – the theorists might say that the inauthentic is once you get commercial – become commercial and sell out. That is when you become inauthentic. Anything before that is authentic? That’s very crude...

Coon: That – what I call almost like a vulgar lefty sort of – it is not only wrong it is a theory which is kind of pinned on to what was actually going on. Furthermore it is a failed theory. It actually has no relation to reality whatever. But furthermore it – I believe it was absolutely detrimental to the working class. It meant that any working class person, who became successful enough to earn a living and then have some profit as a result of earning a living, was then considered to be a sell out. Therefore there was no narrative of what a working class person could do with the profits of their authentic expression of art. So those working class kids had to pretend that they hadn’t made any money. Rather than saying ‘We are going to –’ Rather than the narrative being saying ‘It is wonderful that people buy records; it is wonderful that people pay to buy poetry. It is wonderful that people pay tickets to go and see theatre.’ This anathema of commodification is just absolute bullshit because –

Suterwalla: And rejection of capitalism.

Coon: This kind of rejection of capitalism you know, there is a critique of capitalism but it was complicated. It was elevating the working classes in a way much more powerfully than communism was. So the narrative left wealthy working class kids with having this kind of pejorative ‘You sold out,’ put around their neck. So they couldn’t develop their capitalism to a way of giving back to the community and doing good. So they pretended that they didn’t have any money and had frittered it away on pornography and cocaine. Rather than saying ‘We will build up the local library.’ Or ‘We will give money to the local youth club.’ You know those bands kind of mitigated their guilt by saying ‘Okay we will do a benefit gig.’ Anybody who has run a charity like I have organising a benefit gig is just the most ghastly thing you have to do, because you never get any money from it. The money fritters away somewhere. Then you have wasted hours and months kind of organising the gig. What you would rather do as the rock band is say, ‘Well here is 50 quid.’

Suterwalla: What about the women in the scene? What about them and this idea of selling out (or not)?

Coon: They didn't – the women didn't – they couldn't sell out because they never got that wealthy. They didn't have the valorisation and there was a kind of complicit dishonesty in the whole leftist argument around the commodification of punk. They were quite happy to allow the boys to get – they were quite – to allow the boys to become millionaires. Then the boys would hang out with these millionaire rock stars and get the millionaire rock stars to buy their drugs and hang out wherever. But still writing the articles – if you read any of these Clash books, none of them talk about The Clash being millionaires after their – when I was managing them I made sure I left The Clash knowing all those boys were on paper millionaires. They didn't have a million pounds in the bank. I understand money. There was a delay over the cash coming in. But they were on paper millionaires. The Clash spent the next 10 years talking about – you know, how broke they are – you know. The males of that generation and the rock journalists colluded with that myth. So that they never developed a kind of an ecologic or a green capitalism, more of a Netherland capitalism.

Suterwalla: The women that were –

Coon: The women never –

Suterwalla: But you knew Siouxsie. Did you know Jordan?

Coon: Yes, I mean they never made any money.

Suterwalla: But what did they do -?

Coon: I wasn't – it was a – listen, for my photographs –

Suterwalla: How did they make ends meet being full time punks?

Coon: Didn't we all have jobs?

Suterwalla: Yes, is that right?

Coon: We all had jobs. We worked in the – you know they worked at SEX. They – for instance I mean Bernie Rhodes used one of my photographs as the cover

for the first punk single, I was absolutely astonished. 'Thank you.' Looked at the mock up, realised he – I said 'I damn well want you to credit me.' For a woman to ask to be credited it was considered to be pushy, egotistic, up yourself, unfeminine. So actually to ask – I thought which – 'Do I want 25 quid, or do I want credit?' I was enough – had enough intelligence to understand I needed to survive with my career that I got a credit. But I knew if I hadn't – to ask for money as well would not have worked.

Suterwalla: Wow.

Coon: Yes so it is –

Suterwalla: This is really interesting your comment 'Didn't we all have jobs as well?' Because you know the thing is that when you are looking retrospectively, there is this suggestion that punk was all about just being punk. It wasn't about having a job.

Coon: Yes.

Suterwalla: But you say everybody was working –

Coon: Yes at the record shop or – or on the dole.

Suterwalla: Right, but I guess that's not working or the same?

Coon: It was quite an interesting historical moment, when the Thatcher government cut dole for under 18 year olds. That shift in the dole thing was quite interesting. Also for working class kids I think, when they said that you couldn't go to art school without three A-levels. So the doors were closing for working class kids. The dole was cut, art school – so that kind of period from the '60s to the mid '70s where working class kids were going to art school. What is the word for it - where all academia is being sort of like made more elitist. As you know it is closing down. You are going to have to have more qualifications and pay more for your education. So there was a backlash happening. I actually point my finger –

Suterwalla: It is kind of mirroring today.

Coon: Yes, I point my finger at the Hebdiges of this world. It completely – his thesis completely disempowers the working class. If you wonder why there

has been such a, I think, a slippage in the agency of working class people it is because those leftist academics weren't interested in telling working class people once you have money what – how to do with it. How to use your money to maintain the welfare state. Very, very necessary. The welfare state was wonderful. Just the most incredible thing that we have here. But you have to maintain it. You have to earn money to pay the taxes to maintain the welfare state. To maintain a free education system. If you don't tell the rich working class kids what to do with their money then you are going to have the welfare system take it away from you.

Suterwalla: Can I ask you – we haven't touched on how you entered punk, your background a little bit. Also what you used to wear as a punk.

Coon: I entered punk because I had been part of – the vanguard of the '60s. I had been a –

Suterwalla: Can I ask when you were born?

Coon: I was born in '45. So I was one of the youngest leaders of the hippie underground. Started a – I was at art school.

Suterwalla: Central St Martin's.

Coon: Yes. Started the welfare organisation 'Release' which was to help hippies and I saw the backlash happening. I saw the –

Suterwalla: So did you come from a middle class background?

Coon: Upper class background.

Suterwalla: Upper class?

Coon: Yes, where –

Suterwalla: Could you just describe that for me so that I can understand?

Coon: Upper class background – inherited wealth. My parents had – my father had – my parents inherited wealth.

Suterwalla: So landed aristocracy?

Coon: No, not aristocracy, although we were – there is all that stuff about trying to find your aristocratic ancestor. But he was Lord of the Manor. So the farm, there was the Manor House and the farm and – he employed farm workers. We had servants, that kind of thing.

Suterwalla: Where was this?

Coon: Kent. But for various reasons I was sent away from home. I went to boarding school when I was five. That was very weird, for various reasons. I went to a Russian Ballet school. I was the older – it is very interesting. We talk about Muslim family values and kind of critique of primitive patriarchal values in the Muslim community. I was the first girl child.

Suterwalla: Of -?

Coon: Of an upper middle class family. What does that mean to be the first girl child?

Suterwalla: Within patriarchy? I thought not much. You need to be a boy child.

Coon: Exactly! So I was – my mother had failed, had not –

Suterwalla: What was your mother's background? Was she from an upper class background as well?

Coon: Kind of, yes, yes. There was a bit of trade.

Suterwalla: So it was sort of a really -

Coon: Well no, because she was – there was the war. Her parents had been through two world wars. So close you know. So my grandmother's parents had been through – my mother's parents had been through two world wars. My mother was married when she was 16. She had fallen in love with a youth – the child of her parents' best friends. They had said 'Can we get engaged because we want to get married after the war?' Her father had said, having been through the First World War, 'Your husband is flying in Lancaster bombers. Perhaps you shouldn't wait until after the war to get married. Why don't you get married now?' He didn't think that his future son-in-law would survive the war. So these were a generation who had – anyway.

Suterwalla: So how many siblings – so you have many siblings?

Coon: I had younger brothers. But – so anyway I had survived -

Suterwalla: So you were – so upper class background, Lord of the Manor, Kent. You were sent to boarding school. You are then sent to Russia –

Coon: Sent to a Russian Ballet school.

Suterwalla: How amazing!

Coon: Lucky for me. Absolutely amazing. It could have been an orphanage. It could have been a catholic boarding – you know what I mean? It was – so where do you -?

Suterwalla: So they wanted you to become a professional -?

Coon: No, no. They wanted me out of the – they wanted me out. They wanted me then when I was 16 to get married to the millionaire next door. They didn't – so I had to run away. I ran away from home. I ran away from home because I didn't want to get married. I wanted to be educated and my parents weren't –

Suterwalla: Not because of feminism; just because of your -?

Coon: Well I was innately feminist. It was –

Suterwalla: So not because of having –

Coon: The word 'feminism' hadn't come up, but I didn't want to get married; I wanted to be an artist or a dancer. I had been brought up by – in ballet schools where actually a ballet company is a very interesting little microcosm. But where women are – in the arts anybody who has got – that kind of runs away to the arts. You could join a ballet company, you could be a – if you – you could escape bourgeois, sexist culture by running into the arts.

Suterwalla: Was it like it was almost trying to make you a wife.

Coon: Yes, exactly. So the bourgeois culture is trying to make women into wives. But anyway if you – having sent me to a Russian boarding school where all these great ex-dancers were, who had escaped the Russian revolution. You know we were learning – seeing the art of Nadia Goncharova, a woman artist; listening to Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky. So I had as a kind of antidote to the bourgeois restrictions of my patriarchal family home, because they couldn't find anywhere else as a boarding school that would take a five year old, I was luckily, by incredible chance sent to this highly cultured Russian Ballet school in Tunbridge Wells. Then I went to the Royal Ballet School.

Suterwalla: Gosh how amazing! So they sent you away at five?

Coon: Listen, exactly – had a working class person sent their children –

Suterwalla: Because you weren't a boy effectively – or?

Coon: Well I haven't – well I mean. But, no. What age do you think my brothers were sent away to boarding school?

Suterwalla: Five.

Coon: No, six and seven is the more average. All upper class parents send their children away from home at the age of six, seven. But the upper classes, the white upper classes in England do not live with their children. They send their children to boarding school. I was sent to boarding school when I was five. From the age of five until I ran away at 16; I was only with my parents three months of the year. That is the norm. That is what – if you look at the Tory front bench today, their children are at Eton, are at boarding schools. Those people don't have children in their houses but for occasional weekends or for the holidays. I mean it is – When I look at five year olds now and think that I was – it is unconscionable. But as I have said, luckily I was wearing a tutu and blah blah. Anyway so I had this very unconventional background. Saw a lot of life, a lot of street life.

Suterwalla: But well educated then.

Coon: Well no – well in the arts. Well educated by the Royal Ballet School and by Legat Ballet School, in a very wide kind of education which was very – you know I learnt – we were taught to appreciate music, taught to dance, taught – it was a very rich education. So when I was 16, 17 I grew too tall and

couldn't actually – you had to be very brilliant to be a ballerina if you were over a certain height. But there are other branches of – so I wanted to go to art school, I could perhaps be a set designer – whatever. My parents wouldn't pay for my education. When you are wealthy parents you – I wasn't eligible for a grant because my parents were too wealthy. So I had to – from the age of 16, when I went to do my A-levels at night school until I was 20, I had four years. By the time I was 21, 20, I had four years of income tax from earning my living to be able to get a mature student grant. I don't know how it works nowadays. Anyway so I saw a lot of street life as a teenager, trying to work –

Suterwalla: In London?

Coon: In London trying to work.

Suterwalla: What did you do? What sort of jobs?

Coon: Nude modelling. You know what – there wasn't equal pay. I worked at hamburger joints. It was difficult to – I needed to work fulltime to – you know with trying to be a student full time and work is quite tough, quite difficult. So I had a lot of experience of street life. So when the hippie movement came I had seen what happened to working class people that were arrested; I knew what to do. Then by the end of the '60s when there was this backlash against the hippie movement where we were being told in the tabloids that the hippie movement had failed, that we were a lot of promiscuous anti-religious, anti-authoritarian ne'er do wells. The police were busting our free festivals. Our magazines were busted; there was the big *Oz* trial, where the editors of the newspaper, the big hippie newspaper were put on trial for obscenity. The whole weight of the state, encouraged by the corporate media crushed the hippie movement. I thought I would – I was beginning – I then went to university. I thought I needed to be across a little bit more – I was a spokesperson for the youth movement. I thought I need to be a little bit more across submissions here. Psychological issues, economic issues, social issues. So I went to Brunel University to read psychology, sociology, economics. I thought 'I wonder what is going to happen next. This is interesting.' The hippie movement wanted to change society with peace and love and our symbol was flowers. I think the next generation are going to be quite angry about this. I went to my organisation 'Release' and we were across drug laws. I said to them 'Incidentally I think you ought to get across the laws of dangerous weapons'. So I said to them 'I

think we should get –’ I had that sense that the younger generation was going to be quite angry at the establishment’s failure to take the hippie ideal on board –

Suterwalla: And make it work.

Coon: Or help it along; progress it along. Instead of trying to crush it. I was kind of looking – I was looking out for what was going to happen next. So I had been headhunted to write for *Melody Maker*, I was freelancing, I was writing this and writing that and interviewing the New York Rape Squad. I was doing all this stuff.

Suterwalla: As part of your hippie identity?

Coon: I had – my profile had been very – my profile had been quite high as a result of being spokesperson for the hippie movement. And being out as a promiscuous free loving young woman, as kind of an ‘It’ girl of the hippie movement. But also running this incredible organisation which was lobbying parliament and that kind of thing. So when the hippie movement was crushed and I was a witness in the *Oz* trial, the whole movement was kind of – it was – the movement was splintering. The leftists didn’t like the headiness of some section of the hippie movement. Then you got the – some of the bands that were employing people like the Hell’s Angels to do the security at gigs. Then you had got the deaths in the Rolling Stone concert. Then you had got the hippie Charles Manson massacre. You know what I mean? A lot of heavy stuff was kind of shattering that peace and love ideal. So I was looking out for – you know, this is a very – counterculture is very interesting. A lot of energy comes from countercultural movement. What is going to happen next? So when – and I had been headhunted by *Melody Maker* I was the kind of a star journalist in *Melody Maker*. So if I went to listen to music I was – everybody – all the stars wanted me to interview them. I had got a big space in *Melody Maker*. So when somebody said to me ‘Would you like to come and listen to a band called The Sex Pistols?’ it was ‘Yes.’ Sex Pistols was a semantic change of tempo. Instead of ‘love’ it was ‘sex’ and ‘peace’ it was ‘pistols’. That was a real ‘Ah okay.’ It was against – so the language was going to change. So I saw The Sex Pistols and it was like ‘This is the reaction.’

Suterwalla: Where did you see them?

Coon: I saw them at their second gig. I can't quite remember now. I can't remember which gig it – it was the second gig. Maybe it was at an art school or – I don't know I can't remember. Anyway it was the second gig. The manager was amazed, 'What is Caroline Coon doing at this – we have only – this is a second gig.'

Suterwalla: Was that McLaren?

Coon: Yes. As it happened I think Bernie Rhodes was probably there at the gig too. When – was very jealous that when he saw Malcolm McLaren talking to me he came running back and 'I have got a band too.' Anyway so I go in to – saw the other band. Went to the *Melody Maker* and said 'Guess what? There is this incredible thing happening.' All the white hippie journalists at the *Melody Maker* said 'No, you are only a girl we won't take any notice of you.' I thought 'Actually I am going to stick by this story,' and bought myself a camera and became part of the punk movement in a way. I was recording what was happening from a sociological, cultural – it wasn't then called cultural studies. I think that is what I was doing. As much interested in - as much as what the fans were saying as what the bands were saying. So when The Sex Pistols' Bill Grundy incident happened on the TV when it became tabloid news – I was absolutely – the *Melody Maker* knew I was across the story. So it was my story and I was very competitive. I wanted to do it before the other music press too. But I became in a way the hippie part of the punk movement. I was – my discussion with the kids who were 10 years or seven years younger than me – was all about how hippies had failed. If you listen to those early interviews that I am doing with those – it is kind of – we are having a discussion; a kind of argument.

I had kind of the – I had sort of – we like style and fashion. We like new changes – we like the new; it is entertaining. It is a human thing to like the new. One of the reasons why I perked up my ears when my friends said 'Come and see The Sex Pistols,' because as a matter of fact, I had been slightly changing my look. From being '40s glamour ethnic. It was second hand '40s clothes which you can't – it was like what was on stores at Portobello Market. Which were these beautiful – which were '40s clothes actually, '30s, '40s second-hand clothes. You would get for two shillings beautiful cut silk dresses with high-waist – Rita Hayworth. I don't know whether you know who Rita Hayworth is?

Suterwalla: Yes, yes.

- Coon: Yes, okay. Rita – that kind of Rita Hayworth. There was that narrative of hippie look too. There was a Rita Hayworth kind of look. It was slightly – I was slightly changing. I was going to SEX on the King’s Road and buying patent leather stiletto heels. Kind of to change the look to make what – growing a bit older –
- Suterwalla: A bit more aggressive?
- Coon: Making it a bit more edgy. Just a little bit more – so when Alan said to me – because he worked at SEX and he was a barman - and Alan said come and take a look and then I was buying the odd thing from SEX. So one’s clothes were slightly – I was basically wearing that kind of stuff then, that was it.
- Suterwalla: Tell me about SEX. How did you -? Was everyone talking about SEX? How did you hear about it? What was it like to go shopping there?
- Coon: Well it was interesting because – it is interesting how subculture kind of mutates from the streets. As the political climate changed and the velvet – the shops that were selling velvet jackets and things on the King’s Road kind of were losing money. They weren’t getting – the generation who was wearing them at 19 were now 29. So there was this young generation coming up which felt different. Therefore these were these tiny boutiques starting up that had a kind of a different feel. So SEX – and actually it was – since all the ‘30’s and ‘40s clothes had almost been bought up from the markets, they were beginning to fall apart. The next kind of look that people were going – we were going to retrofit into the present was the ‘50s look. So on the King’s Road or on Carnaby Street which were the kind of street fashion kind of meccas, the shops began to be having that kind of ‘50s look. So the kind of the look in SEX was a little bit more ‘50s; zoot suits and kind of patent leather belts; high heels. So with that kind of – kind of like Malcolm McLaren’s perverted like rubber stockings and things which are – that was there as well. But it was mixed into this new kind of – the new ‘What retro style are we going to plunder?’ So it was the – so the ‘50s look came in.
- Suterwalla: So Westwood’s – you know, the stuff that has now become really iconic. The ‘Destroy’ t-shirt, the swastika. Susie wore a t-shirt with breasts. There were penises, two cowboys and a penis; all sorts of bondage stuff that started to come out. Then obviously –

- Coon: But there was also in that shop patent leather belts, mohair jumpers; you know it was a real mix of '50s. So that punk look is a kind of a melange of perversion gone mainstream; sadomasochistic stuff and shocking images with the '50's look. With kind of like full skirts and a bit of petticoats. So when The Slits are wearing - it is the '50s, it was the melange of '50s.
- Suterwalla: Sorry, you were going to say 'When The Slits were wearing -'
- Coon: I think when The Slits are wearing kind of the tutu skirt it is like the '50s skirt cropped into a miniskirt. So one - what is available in second-hand shops or in market stalls as second-hand clothes. It wasn't called 'vintage' then, it was second-hand clothes. What can you buy cheap? It was second hand '50s stuff.
- Suterwalla: So The Slits almost making a reference to that, as much as anything?
- Coon: Yes, it is 'What can you buy on the market stalls to kind of -?' What is the word now? 'Customise' it. Often the boutiques, because I could have - even as a journalist I couldn't really afford stuff in Malcolm's shop. That is being worn by - it is being bought by the fashionistas that have a bit of money. So one was looking at Vivienne Westwood and recreating it. So that is how the bin bag look came about. Because Vivienne Westwood was making these very expensive kind of patent leather stockings and stuff, which you couldn't buy. But you could mimic the look by using bin liners.
- Suterwalla: So who was copying you? Because Hebdige would say that it was the working street kids on the street who are using safety pins and bin liners.
- Coon: It was - I would say that bin liner look is actually copied from Westwood.
- Suterwalla: It is interesting to me that - because who is copying you, it is important because it is kind of - so it wasn't just made up by people without any money who are just making it up kind of thing.
- Coon: Well you could go in - this is how street fashion happens. It is kind of like it is a wonderful circulation of ideas that you could go - you know, we would go into SEX, look at all the clothes - look at it all and go out and copy it. There are very early pictures of the iconic fashion icons at that time like Lydon, like - well as a matter of fact Lydon is absolutely iconic in this

because it wasn't until Joe Strummer saw Johnny Rotten that he cut his hippie hair off. When Joe is in 101-ers he is a hippie. It is quite interesting that Joe is a hippie. Slightly older, so he has got a kind of a political ideology there. Whereas The Sex Pistols are really nihilistic. They are a bit younger and haven't got that kind of legacy. Actually because Lydon really is working class. I guess there is hardly a book in his house. But Strummer is having to kind of finesse his diplomatic father's – so you know, he is an educated boy, Strummer. But anyway if you look at those very early pictures and in my – in order to distinguish himself from the hippies, Lydon aged 16 isn't wearing any denim. But he is wearing second-hand suits from the market; bigger than him which he has tied up round the waist with rope. So he is going down King's Road in these sort of rather second-hand suits tied up. Going into SEX and so – he has got an attitude, an absolutely bravado street kid attitude. Lounging about trying to thief stuff from Malcolm and Vivienne. But they are looking at him and he is looking at them. So it is very much a give and take. So for instance you know how quickly that incredible fashion then becomes – you know, Zandra Rhodes takes it up two years' later, the street –

Suterwalla: It gets commodified very fast.

Coon: Yes, but I would – commodified is a – are you using it as pejorative?

Suterwalla: I know what you mean. Does it sound like I'm feeding back into that idea of selling out?

Coon: It has inspired her. She is looking at street clothes and she is being inspired by that street sense. Certainly – although I couldn't afford Zandra Rhodes it certainly – the street always enlivens elite culture. Whether you are Sebelius listening to the folk melodies of the people; turning those folk melodies into classical music. Or Dior looking at – actually it would be Yves Saint Laurent looking at the street clothes and incorporating. You know, that always happens. But I would – I don't use commodification as pejorative, I love commodification. I want my creative work to be so influential that it becomes commodified. My art is a luxury. I would certainly give some art away but I want – I want people to be able to afford my art so I can carry on painting. So this idea that academics who have got their university stipend should sneer at people who have to sell their skirts, their shoes, their necklaces, their music and decry it as commodification is anathema to me. What one wants to critique is the fairness of the system and discuss what

people do with their share of profits. That is the discussion. 'What do you do with the excess of your earnings? Where do you put it? How much do you pay in tax? What do you do?' That is the critique, not the commodification itself.

Suterwalla: What a fascinating set of ideas. I am just conscious of the time.

Coon: I agree. I am fading because of the – what you should do –

Suterwalla: I would just like to ask you this very quickly and finally, what do you think punk meant for women? Punk style meant for women?

Coon: What punk style meant for women is that it changed forever what women could look like in the public space. The way that the punk women were presenting themselves on the street was 1000% more shocking than anything that the male punks did. The women punks were spat at; they were decried; they were condemned.

Suterwalla: Because of what they had looked like before? That is why it was more shocking, because they were women?

Coon: Because they were abolishing the passive, ladylike feminine look which was imprisoning for women. Femininity was a prison for women. What the punks were doing was saying 'We are going to be not girls or children – or like the living doll. We are going to be mature, strong female women.' You forget that the word – the term 'woman' was a derogatory term. It still is. Some people you find that they find it very difficult to talk about 'women'. They would rather say 'ladies'. So the punk style was anti-lady. In other words it was enabling young women to be strong.

Suterwalla: Why do you think it was more shocking than what the men were doing?

Coon: Because it was more threatening to the status quo. It was more threatening to the status quo because what the punk men were doing is actually orthodox male behaviour which is valorised. The punk male impoliteness, burping, getting drunk, destroying furniture; is what upper class men do at their clubs. It is orthodox male rite of passage.

Suterwalla: It just – kind of extreme, an extreme version.

Coon:

It was a working class version of it, which was sneered at because it is working class. But the upper classes do it as well. Men behave like that. They are allowed to behave like that. You just have to kind of settle down a bit. So punk men could kind of behave like that. It was expected of them. In fact the adults kind of valorised that kind of behaviour of their young men. But when women started to want the same freedom it was shocking. It was going to completely destroy the idea of the bourgeois family. If women were going to demand equal rights to men, i.e. a life outside the family, it was going to mean an absolutely revolutionary change in the way men function in society. Men were going to – it was the way punk women behaved. The strength as women that they demanded meant that they were going to earn their own living, go to work. That meant that men were going to have to share in the domestic chores.

So when men – patriarchal men see women leaving the domestic sphere, it signals to men that they are going to have to do some domestic stuff. Which men tend to want to not do. But actually what women have to do as feminists is persuade men that if you do a little bit of housework you actually – you know it is a very liberating thing to do. You will have a better time; you would have a better time with – if you are – in your heterosexual lives you will have a better time with women if you share the domestic sphere. You engage more with your children, if you push them to school, share the – that has happened. That change in the way men relate to their children – relate to the domestic sphere was very much heralded by the '60s and '70s youth movements. I think that is one of the reasons why there was such a huge backlash against it. It meant that a certain generation of men were going to lose a lot of their privileges and they didn't like it.

Suterwalla:

Caroline, thank you. Thank you so much.

End

## Lucy Whitman

Interview date: 30 November 2009.

Location: participant's house, Harringay, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours 12 minutes.

Start

Whitman: Is this recording now? Okay well then, what was I going to say? Oh yes, the thing is there does seem to be quite a lot of interest in that period of history. And I've...haven't had time to kind of put my own stuff on the web or anything. Do you know what I mean? But I think I will, given that there is such a lot of interest and since I've still got it all, you know what I mean?

Suterwalla: Yes definitely.

Whitman: But it's just a question of time really, you know.

Suterwalla: Yes of course.

Whitman: I mean and it, I find it quite amusing as well as interesting that punk is of interest to people 30 years later, you know what I mean? Because at the time it all felt completely ephemeral. So I honestly couldn't have guessed that in 30 years time this would be remotely interesting to anyone.

Suterwalla: Right.

Whitman: But, looking back on it I can see that it was significant so there's various people have done the same as you which...kind of tracked me down and interviewed me for various different purposes. So there's ob-, there obviously is interest out there and when I've googled Whitman, you know I have found some stuff on the web so...Some of it inaccurate which is really really annoying.

Suterwalla: That's interesting, yes.

Whitman: And that's why I feel at some point I need to make a concerted effort to sort of put the record straight.

The most annoying thing...

Suterwalla: But for archive or...I mean just for in perspective of someone who would love that archive material, it would be invaluable.

Whitman: Yes. And where have you found stuff basically?

Suterwalla: Well perhaps I should just very briefly introduce myself. I worked as a journalist for about ten years in current affairs mostly. I worked at Newsweek and then at The Economist. And during that time I was always very interested in identity politics but obviously I was just kind of following stories in terms of current affairs and things.

And then I went on a very, well kind of extended maternity leave and during that time really thought about what I wanted to do with the material that had sort of been whirring around in my head.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: And 2001 happened with the World Trade Centre and all sorts of things. And so I have come to this project after accumulating lots of different bits of interest. So this project looks at the way women since the 1970s in Britain have used dress to express either identities. And punk women between '75 and '79 really that's the... Because I want to look very much at the first wave.

Whitman: Right, yes.

Suterwalla: This is one of my case studies.

Whitman: Right okay. So what are your other ones then?

Suterwalla: The other ones are Greenham Common women in the '80s.

Whitman: Right.

Suterwalla: Then I go on to look at black British women in the 1980s and 1990s in hip-hop.

Whitman: Is that African Caribbean women?

Suterwalla: Yes, it includes them.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: And then since 2001 to the present I'm looking at Muslim women who wear hijab out of their own choice.

Whitman: Yes, really interesting. Yes.

Suterwalla: So those are the four case studies. I'm looking to juxtapose them. And to draw parallels. I'm not trying to put one next to the other just for the sake of showing resistance if you like but very much to draw on the personal experiences of women.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: And one of the things I'm doing with punk therefore is going back and building on what subcultural theory has had to say, but also recognising that so much of our understanding of punk now has to be through embodied and lived reality. And so I'm doing interviews and trying to speak to women about their individual experiences as punk women during the first-wave.

Whitman: Okay.

Suterwalla: To get as much detail about how they put their dress together and what it meant to you. And what you took from images and how you were represented and how that felt. I'm trying to explore how personal subjectivity might have been different from standard representations or mainstream or even academic representations of punk.

Whitman: Okay. It's huge isn't it?

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: Absolutely huge, but very interesting. And did I gather, not from you but I got an email from somebody else are you working with Juliet Ash?

Suterwalla: Yes, yes.

Whitman: Right okay. Because I do know her and she...

Suterwalla: Yes she did mention.

Whitman: Yes because she interviewed me years ago but I didn't really... I don't know her well but I did know her partner Dave Widgery because he was in 'Rock Against Racism'.

Suterwalla: Yes of course, that's right.

Whitman: And she was very marginal to that but she interviewed me. I think she was interviewing me about women, punk and fashion actually. I mean it is a long time ago. I've got it somewhere. In fact I think that might be on the web, I think I might have seen it there.

Suterwalla: Oh, your interview with Juliet?

Whitman: I think it might be.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Whitman: Or there's a reference to it, yes.

Suterwalla: Right that's interesting. I'll check that out and follow up on that.

Whitman: I mean I've probably got it somewhere.

Suterwalla: I know that she's got some copies of magazines and articles for me to look at so it might be in that too. I'll check.

Whitman: Yes, yes. Well so have I. Just, I just feel that this is very very interesting but it is absolutely massive. And it's going to be difficult for me to kind of, you know be succinct I suppose.

Suterwalla: Could we start perhaps with your own background and how you found yourself interested in punk? Or how you started to get involved with the punk scene?

Whitman: Okay. Well I was there...right very very early on I saw 'The Sex Pistols' at Walthamstow's Town Hall in about Easter 1976. And...I was living in Crouch End. It was my sister's boyfriend who was on the pulse of the moment. They were older than me. I mean, you know it's quite funny

because I was, 1976 I was 21 nearly 22 which was actually very old to be a punk. So I almost felt I was slightly too old. But anyway and they were older than me. But it was...as I say it was him who sort of got me interested in it. And I went to the Screen on the Green which was about June '76 as well, I was there. And I went to the Hundred Club a lot. So I mean I really was around in that '76/'77 period. And actually after that, it got much less interesting. Sadly, I mean it was very cliquey. It was just like a few hundred people and it was fun to be one of those few hundred people. And once other people started to get interested I began to lose interest to some extent.

Suterwalla: I'd like to explore that, but before we get there can you tell me more about your background, would you identify it with a class?

Whitman: My background's middle class and you know Crouch End was not in the least bit a trendy suburb then, it was very dull. And not...there was nothing, you know now it's very sought after but it wasn't then. Although, yes but anyway. So...and I was at...I was at university so of course that made me not a typical punk. And I was at University College but I lived at home because I wanted to go to University College. So at University College, I was doing English and I started in 1975, no no '74. I was there from '74 to '77. So it completely took me over in my final year which was...which rather distracted me from my studies. But in terms of my...basically I was definitely already a feminist before I got into punk, so I brought that with me into punk. And the other thing was I mean I'm sort of much less involved now but my sister's an artist and we were very into...well you know I was just kind of, used to go to a lot more exhibitions and things. One of the things which definitely was an influence on me in... Well we went to the Edinburgh Festival a couple of years running in the early '70s. And must have been, probably it was...it was 1976, went to the Edinburgh Festival saw an exhibition by Kurt Schwitters of collages and that was very influential on me. Do you know Kurt Schwitters' work?

Suterwalla: Not in detail.

Whitman: Okay so he was a German refugee who was interned in Britain in the war. Did amazing stuff with collages and you know lots of bits of newspaper. When I started to put *Jolt* together I sort of was interested in the visuals but also the words were always really important so it was never random, it was always, you know, words which were meaningful to me which I put into those collages.

Suterwalla: Yes I'm sure.

Whitman: Anyway so there was that. As I say I feel kind of far away from that now but there was quite a visual kind of art collegey sort of... Although I didn't go to art college, I was around people who did.

Suterwalla: Is that what inspired the style of *Jolt*...?

Whitman: I mean I think when the fanzines came out I thought 'Oh I could do that.' And I've got, I personally have got no quality of draughtsmanship whatsoever whereas my sister's really really good at drawing. But I did like to play around with visual imagery but as I say with quite a languagly basis to it as well. And when I was interested in punk I was probably more interested in the lyrics than...well music it can't...you know it's of no musical interest whatsoever but the lyrics, you know so... So the words have always been really important to me. But it was, you see my feeling about punk is it was kind of theatre, it wasn't really music it was theatre, it was performance art. And the visuals were much more important than the music. I mean I would say the music was the least important ingredient, you know the visuals and the lyrics and the general atmosphere and attitude were much more important than anything musical.

Suterwalla: Is that because you were close to people at art schools, and the kind of 'punk' if you like that was starting to be important there?

Whitman: I did feel that people might challenge my right to be a punk because I was a university student from a middle class background. But actually nobody did and because there was just kind of, there was quite a camaraderie within the early punk scene. And...I mean I don't know the class background of all the protagonists. Obviously quite a lot of them were working class but they weren't all by any means. I don't think Jo Strummer was for example, I don't know but I think lots of people weren't working class at all. But it...you know really to be a member you just had to kind of buy into the ideas of it. And as I say I mean when I put out my first fanzine so that was Spring '77.

Suterwalla: *Jolt*, the first one.

Whitman: Yes, yes. I thought that people might think that it wasn't genuine, do you know what I mean? That this was not genuine punk but actually it was absolutely lapped up by whoever kind of came across it. So I sort of felt 'Oh well then that's alright then. I am as authentic as anybody else.' Basically.

Suterwalla: Yes. Can you talk me through how the first issue came about?

Whitman: Yes but I just need to say before that. The other thing that I was in a band, it wasn't really a proper band because we had very little musical ability between us. It was a sort of performance art thing so again it's this kind of art student background. There was six of us, called ourselves 'The Neons'. The reason we called ourselves 'The Neons' is because a cousin of mine had been to America and learnt to make neon sculpture so she, so you know we just found this fascinating. And she made us a beautiful and she was in the band. She made a beautiful neon sign which said 'The Neons'. And we did three, basically we only did three performance in our lives and there were six of us as I said. And it was very very visual. It was sort of fun.

Suterwalla: Were you a mix of men and women?

Whitman: No, no it was all women.

Suterwalla: All women?

Whitman: Yes. So...

Suterwalla: Where were your performances?

Whitman: Well one was... The first one I had a friend who put on cabarets at Chalk Farm. There's a pub at Chalk Farm, The Enterprise at Chalk Farm and they were very very... It's kind of very Dada the sort of thing he used to do. He used to do quite hilarious sort of performances and they were just miscellaneous people. So we performed there once and then we... I think we may have performed twice with his cabaret. We did one performance at Plaistow, that's the art college which must be now part of University of East London I suppose.

Suterwalla: Right, yes.

Whitman: And we did one at The Place which is the dance, you know the London School of Contemporary Dance.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Whitman: So this was, you know just to do with the connections we had. And have to say the performance at Plaistow we got booed off the stage because we were not what they expected. They probably expected a proper rock band, you know whereas we were actually just making all these jokes. And we did things like, you know we sort of used vacuum cleaners as musical instruments and what have you. And I do have some pictures.

Suterwalla: I'd love to see those please. I'm surprised you were booed, I thought that would have been in the spirit of punk—the fun, the irony...?

Whitman: So this was all 1976 you see. So I remember at one performance we did we overheard somebody saying 'Is this punk or Dada?' Which we took to be a great compliment.

Suterwalla: Yes, of course, though many have made links with punk and Dada so...

Whitman: Yes! But so this was all happening at the same time. And it's very interesting that you ask me this because I've never really thought about it but obviously... So what I was coming from, okay so I was at university doing English Literature but I had all this kind of art college influence around me and that was, you know and that was, you know my sister's, my sister and her boyfriend both were, went to art college. So you know that's where all this. My sister went to Sheffield and then she came to the Slade and... But they had met years before at Barnet, did their Foundation Course at Barnet. I can't remember where he went to do his degree. Anyway so that was all...so I'd done this kind of performance which was not punk but it was performance art basically in what we were doing. Very jokey.

Suterwalla: So I have to ask you about the connections with Situationism since you've brought this up. As I said, many have made the connection, and of course you read all this stuff and then you ask the people who are involved.

Whitman: Well I mean I don't know anything about Situationism, you know except what may have sort of rubbed off on me. I don't know anything about it basically but obviously I was influenced by it, you know unbeknownst to

myself. You see what I mean. If...I'll just. What I got out, I've got miscellaneous things to show you here.

Suterwalla: Oh brilliant. Lucy thank you so much, this is...

Whitman: This is the album that I put together for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday which was a way of kind of...

Suterwalla: Do you mind if I take some photos?

Whitman: No okay. So I called it my Jubilee Album, you see the punk reference?

Suterwalla: Yes, excellent.

Whitman: So I mean just, you know obviously it went through my life but... Right, now this was the cabaret. Okay, 'Admission 30p for Students, £1.45', Cabaret Beanschnaps that's what it was called.

Suterwalla: Oh, hang on. Well how does that work?

Whitman: Well it was a joke. Okay, I mean that was Kensington. Right that's interesting because we did our first, yes we did our first performance in the summer... I've got another leaflet for that one but then this... So this, so you see this is how we promoted ourselves, completely surreal basically, just surreal.

Suterwalla: And how did you put that together?

Whitman: No that was physically stuck together and photocopied.

Suterwalla: That's great, it's gorgeous.

Whitman: We've got no good photos it's so sad. But this was us. I mean why we didn't... So that was a dummy that we had. That is me behind there wearing those golden gloves. That's my sister, that's my cousin who was the neon artist.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: And that's a friend of ours called Sue and another friend called Norma. Anyway so I'm afraid that's the best we could get of photos which is such a pity.

Okay, later on I was in another band but I think this just goes beyond your...it goes beyond your dates you see. It goes into 1982 but that was my pink party frock.

Suterwalla: Oh wow.

Whitman: It's there as well.

Suterwalla: Ah, yes.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: Do you still have it?

Whitman: No I gave that away you know. I have got a couple of clothes which I can show you.

Suterwalla: Yes please. Excellent.

Whitman: So you see I actually used to cut my hair myself. And when I cut it off because before it was 1976, the Summer of '76 was when I cut my hair off and I actually cut it with a razor so it used to just sort of stick out. But it didn't look, it never looked like the sculptured like Jordan or something like that, it was just...you know.

Suterwalla: Yes. Did you dye it?

Whitman: No I didn't you see because that... You see I always felt that kind of Toyah Willcox look was completely and utterly not punk actually for me being a purist. You know I felt that it had got completely sabotaged by that so I didn't have...yes you know what you see on those...on the postcards now when you see punks, you know postcards for tourists, punks in London, that look was kind of so stylised, you know it didn't have any individuality to it. So, anyway...

Suterwalla: Those are very helpful, thank you.

Whitman: I just think...no it's too young. Because I did...these, you see this was our friend Jim who used to do these cabarets. So actually this was our first one or we weren't... I don't think we were even on the bill for that.

Suterwalla: Okay right.

Whitman: He's so much fun. And you know he's a fantastic typographer.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So that was our first one. We weren't even sort of on the bill but that was when we were on the bill, if you see what I mean. So that's the same thing. So...yes so that was us lined up together.

Suterwalla: Ah, yes, I see.

Whitman: They're beautiful. I mean he is a fantastic, he's a fantastic designer. He doesn't do it anymore but he was very very good. Do you...he used to do. Af-, well after that he used to do all the posters for the South Bank Serious Concerts which are really all good.

Suterwalla: They're beautiful, yes really.

Whitman: Anyway so that was where, you know where I had been or where I was while punk was getting going. So I went to lots of gigs but it was 1977 was when I put my own fanzine together. And I think I just felt so... This was about March 1977 I had my Finals in May and June, you know and I remember I was finding it really hard to finish my degree because my head was full of all of this, you know. And this was where my heart was as well but I didn't want to kind of blow it. But I do remember I was supposed to be writing an essay on King Lear. My tutor was A S Byatt and...

Suterwalla: Lucky you!

Whitman: Well no as it happens. I requested her because she was the most fantastic inspiring lecturer. She was really brilliant. When I got her as a tutor, we didn't get on at all and she was actually quite anti feminist. And reaction at the time and she's kind of changed quite a bit since then but at the time she was obviously very threatened basically. Anyway so we didn't click,

wouldn't at all and it wasn't a happy thing. Anyway I remember I was, I nearly handed in just a collage instead of an essay on King Lear. I nearly handed in a collage but I realised that that would not...

Suterwalla: How interesting!

Whitman: That wouldn't do actually so in the end I did put it in.

Suterwalla: So can I take you back to the feminism.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: Tell me about that because obviously it's the 1970s second wave, really kicking off.

Whitman: Well.

Suterwalla: How did you get into... How did your feminist consciousness sort of get awakened?

Whitman: My sister and I both read Simone de Beauvoir and that did it, that's all it took.

Suterwalla: At school or?

Whitman: Well I think I was in my gap year actually. Because I remember when I was at school, so I was in the Sixth Form, did my A-levels in 1973. And I remember there was a debate and the motion was 'The liberation of women is not necessary'. And somebody asked me to speak to that motion and I remember saying 'Oh well I'm not sure I agree with that.' That was where I was at that time. And in fact interestingly enough, so I didn't... I just sort of listened to the debate. And I...that was probably one of the things which, you know turned me into a feminist actually, sort of hearing that debate. And then read Simone de Beauvoir and then was kind of no turning back after that.

Suterwalla: Right.

Whitman: And when I...yes another thing. So by the time... So during my gap year so before I went to university I was, you know becoming a feminist basically. And...

Suterwalla: How did that manifest in terms of your daily life?

Whitman: Well see this is the trouble because as I say this is like, so there's just so much...too much information. Well it made me question my sexuality let's say that. And actually at university we had, makes me wince now I'm afraid, we had an anti-sexist group which were called 'The People Against Sexism'. And I suppose, you know I developed my feminist politics within that. At the time I used to read, my reading matter at the time I can just sort of...*Socialist Worker*. I was never a member but I used to read the paper every week so it had an influence on me. The *NME* and *Spare Rib*. And I'm trying to think when I started reading *Spare Rib*. I certainly...

Suterwalla: Because it came out in '72 didn't it?

Whitman: Yes well I wasn't reading it then. I probably, it probably was about 1976. So it was all happening at the same time, you see.

Suterwalla: Where would you get these from?

Whitman: *Socialist Worker* was just sold, you know I mean especially I suppose you know near university campuses and so forth.

Suterwalla: Sort of in the local newsagents?

Whitman: *Spare Rib* you could buy in the newsagent.

Suterwalla: Oh right.

Whitman: Yes, oh yes *Spare Rib* had proper distribution deal it was in all the newsagents. So *Spare Rib* you could just buy at the newsagent. *NME* obviously you could and *Socialist Worker* would just be sold on the street corners, you know.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Whitman: So that was my reading matter. I didn't read an ordinary newspaper at the time. And, yes so...

Suterwalla: And you were still living at home then?

Whitman: I was still living at home but we...but what it was because my sister had been, she'd been to Sheffield and she'd been desperately unhappy there. And she came back to do an MA at the Slade and we were able to arrange our... My parents house was very big, we were able to arrange so we had a kind of separate part of the house for me and her. So we didn't kind of eat with our parents or anything like that although obviously we were under their wing. But we had a se-, we used to have... So with our group of friends, I mean 'The Neons' actually how 'The Neons' came about was because we had a group of friends who we used to have 'at homes' once a month which is where we just did kind of creative games and stuff. And it was through that that we came up with the idea for the 'The Neons' I think.

Suterwalla: Oh brilliant. So just friends would come over once a month?

Whitman: Yes, yes but we used to play games like Consequences. That 'Barnacles and Limpets' that was one of our songs with 'The Neons'. That...we wrote that as kind of like automatic writing because we...sitting round together we did it like Consequences. We...I think we said we had to write a sonnet or something but each person would write the next line. And you...So it was a completely surreal poem but we turned it into a song. So it didn't have any meaning, it was just kind of mysterious and evocative. So there was all of that going on which obviously wouldn't have been going on I suppose for, you know lots of people who were involved in punk. But then on the other hand, you know the fact was that all sorts of different people from different backgrounds did get involved in punk. So by the time punk came along I was a feminist. I regarded myself as an anarchist rather than a socialist really. I read Emma Goldman and one of my heroines was Valerie Solanas.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Whitman: And I remember...

Suterwalla: The SCUM Manifesto?

Whitman: Yes. And I remember that some of my male friends were deeply shocked by that others thought it was hilarious. And I mean you see SCUM Manifesto I regarded is like a punk text because it's a joke, you know but it got a lot of truth in it but it is a joke actually. And it has that kind of viscous edge to it. So have you actually seen any copies of *Jolt*?

Suterwalla: No I've only seen archive pictures.

Whitman: Okay. So what and where have you seen them?

Suterwalla: Mostly on the net actually. I found it quite difficult to get... Does the Women's Library have any?

Whitman: It should, well now I did... Now that is a very good question actually. I can't remember if I put some in or not. And the annoying thing is I don't have a copy of numbered, I mean I've got a copy of a copy of number two, I don't have the original of number two. But shall I show you some *Jolts* now?

Suterwalla: Oh yes please.

Whitman: So right here we have... And of course the photocopying's absolutely terrible so it's a shame actually because, you know didn't know anything about...can't remember what we call it but you know sort of when you get photos to be... I mean look.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: Anyway so... Right, so this was the first one and I've got, you see I've got the original. I've got the original, that is the original artwork. And I reprinted it so then I put that on it. That was for the reprint.

Suterwalla: Oh that is amazing. That is amazing.

Whitman: So...okay so actually it's more interesting really to look at the artwork than to look at that because you can actually see it better.

Suterwalla: Because it really is cut and paste isn't it?

Whitman: Yes those were the days. That was about The Slits. ‘The name of this all girl punk rock group is so vulgar that we are unwilling to print it in a family newspaper.’

Suterwalla: Yes, I’ve been reading about them.

Whitman: And that ‘How an ugly woman is transformed on stage into the beauty queen of rock.’ That was Patti Smith. And you know I was really surprised to discover that people thought she was ugly because I just thought she was incredibly beautiful. So that was really interesting. So you see right from the very start I was writing about, you know sort of bringing in my feminist ideas. I write...you see this was... That was obviously for the reprint, I wrote on it ‘This is a period piece written in January 1977.’ So it must have been...I probably reprinted it about three months later or something. Yes...

Suterwalla: What the original? Why would you do that?

Whitman: Why do...oh because I’d only done about 200 to start with and it all sold out. And it was on sale in Compendium. You know, do you know where fanzines were sold? Compendium Book Shop at Camden Town which basically was a very good independent book shop. It had a big poetry section and there was a guy there, I can’t remember his name he used to write for *Time Out* and then *City Limits*. But he cottoned on to this very early on so a lot of punk fanzines were sold through Compendium. And then after that, Rough Trade was the other place.

Suterwalla: Ladbroke Grove.

Whitman: Ladbroke Grove.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: And interestingly that Rough Trade was actually founded by somebody who I knew vaguely from school. He’d been a few years above me at school. And I was quite pleased because one of my friends saw written on the wall or something, I don’t know it said, you know it was on sale there and...

Suterwalla: So would you take these down physically and just drop them off?

Whitman: Yes, yes. And they were produced in Bourne and Hollingsworth because that had a good photocopier. So Bourne and Hollingsworth were the department on Oxford Street. Because there weren't print shops all up and down the roads.

Suterwalla: That is so...

Whitman: You know you couldn't easily get things printed basically. So I took, I literally took them. I took this to Bourne and Hollingsworth where a middle aged man some, you know soberly photocopied 200 copies of it. And then I had to...so put them all together.

Suterwalla: Oh this is amazing.

Whitman: Well this is what we all did at the time, you know.

Suterwalla: You just don't get to hear of this stuff.

Whitman: No, so anyway...

Suterwalla: So you would, you'd just have to...?

Whitman: Physically, yes and then I took a carrier bag or whatever down to Compendium and that. Anyway so here we go.

So this was all...this was me going on about.

Suterwalla: So you put this together just on your own did you?

Whitman: I did it all on my own. Right that was, you see here we go. That was my plastic jacket. This was my Editorial, right. You know the word 'girl' was a sort of jokey term of abuse within early punk.

Suterwalla: Yes, I've heard that before...

Whitman: So in *Sniffin' Glue*, you know if they didn't like a band they'd say 'They were girls.' Okay. So this 'Just another punk mag for girls ...'. 'I got the idea for this mag two weeks ago when I was lying in bed groaning after having two wisdom teeth out. I decided to call it '*Jolt*'. Lots of other fanzines have come out in the meantime'. That's what it says.

Things were moving so far, I mean it's like two weeks I'm talking about lots of other fanzines have come out since I had the idea for it. So I decided I wanted to write things like I want to do lots of things on girl punks especially who play the guitar. Yes and the other thing I want to do is take up the question of punk and fascism.

Suterwalla: Oh so you were saying that in '77?

Whitman: Oh god yes. Well they're immediate, well I mean, you know Siouxsie Sioux was going around wearing a swastika so, you know. I did notice that this was not a good idea at the time.

So...

Suterwalla: When did she wear that swastika was it '76?

Whitman: Oh yes I mean it was right at the very very beginning. No, yes 'No more room now see Lucy Toothpaste.' Actually that's not my real name.

Suterwalla: So why Lucy Toothpaste?

Whitman: I thought it up in my sleep and when I woke up I couldn't think of a better one. That's what it says it must be true.

Suterwalla: Is it true?

Whitman: I'm sure it was. I think it did, yes. I think just the name Lucy Toothpaste came to me in my sleep and I thought 'Yes that'll do. That's great.'  
So...and the thing was I was literally, you know lying in bed having had this very painful wisdom tooth thing and so you know it continues the dental theme. That's what I sort of thought.

Suterwalla: And so that's really what it, there's a picture of you.

Whitman: Yes. That's a picture of me then at that point.

Suterwalla: '77.

Whitman: Yes, well it might have been taken...yes.

Suterwalla: That's so cool.

Whitman: Right so this was...

Suterwalla: And what was the kind of identity of this compared to other punk fanzines?

Whitman: Right.

Suterwalla: Where were you placing it and what about it's kind of politics and...?

Whitman: Okay, alright. Well some of the fanzines weren't political at all, they were just about the bands. But there were a few, *London's Outrage*, Jon Savage's one was a political one and I'd already seen that and that was probably an inspiration to me to...

Suterwalla: And you were picking that up at Compendium then?

Whitman: Yes, yes. So in my first issue I've got girl bands and then I've got a little teach yourself something about anarchism and distinguishing between anarchism and anarchy. Great punks in history number two Emma Goldman.

Suterwalla: Who was Emma Goldman?

Whitman: Oh she was a very famous anarchist.

Suterwalla: Right. And you had come across her?

Whitman: Yes, while I was at university. I'm just wondering why that is number two. Where is number one? That must been it.

And violence.

Suterwalla: It is picking up on a lot of the social issues.

Whitman: And something about fascism. And these photos you see came from *Socialist Worker*.

Suterwalla: Right.

Whitman: Now that was the Queen meeting the President of Brazil.

Suterwalla: Right.

Whitman: And you know Brazil was a fascist dictatorship at the time.

Suterwalla: Yes, I see the point you're making. And in terms of style, were you getting the design, the graphics of this, were you just borrowing from what the other fanzines were doing?

Whitman: Yes I was just joining in, yes.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So that was Enoch Powell.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So basically...right my first fanzine, early 1977 and...

Suterwalla: And you put this together in your bedroom?

Whitman: Yes I did put it together in my bedroom, yes.

Suterwalla: So you must have had all your copies of *Socialist Worker* and you were just cutting out bit I presume?

Whitman: Yes, exactly. Oh right here's number one, there you are, Valerie Solanas. And so I put them both into the same issue that's... So the thing was, I thought it was really important to challenge the whole, you know, association between punk and fascism, and actually argue about it...it was polemical, basically, but trying to do it in street language...

Suterwalla: Sure, connect with? And what about sexuality?

Whitman: Well didn't tackle that in any overt way but number three did have a cheeky cover.

Suterwalla: Because one of my...another interviewee had that cover and she photocopied it, scanned it and sent it to me via email. Oh I saw that. That's why I said 'I haven't seen any of the originals.'

Whitman: Right, yes.

Suterwalla: She would've picked it up. But she didn't live, she lived in Leeds. May be she got it when she was down in London?

Whitman: Yes, who knows. I don't know. So I was the mistress mind behind all of this and I did...and I was like in total control. But I did get support from friends and this was... My sister did this and... That's from a famous painting, I can't remember the painting. I mean it is, you know apparently a famous painting. You know who that is? It's Mary Whitehouse.

Suterwalla: Oh yes, yes.

Whitman: Because there was the whole gay news trial at the time. Now this was quite an ambiguous cover: it wasn't meant to be ambiguous, it was only after that I realised that not everybody got the joke. Some people thought that by putting Mary Whitehouse into a lesbian scene that was saying 'Oh she's probably queer herself.' Which was absolutely not the message it's supposed to be. Because actually she looks as if she's quite enjoying it and this person, this woman here is in complete ecstasy. So it was just...it's just a juxtaposition really that's... And that's what punk was all about, was about juxtaposing opposing things. So that was just supposed to make people think, really. I mean at the time...Well think about, you know why was the idea of lesbian sex so scary, so frightening, basically? Didn't, certainly didn't write anything about it in the magazine but I was very much a...you know in turmoil I suppose about my own sexuality. And interestingly enough my first relationship with a woman was with someone who was utterly terrified so it was a very unhappy situation. Because I wanted to kind of, you know come out and blast the world with it and she didn't. So it was really really difficult indeed. Anyway so that...

Suterwalla: So what was the content of that one then? We have the cover but then after that occurs?

Whitman: Alright no I mean the cover doesn't you know sort of, well I have my x-ray specs.

Suterwalla: Okay. Oh did you interview Poly Styrene?

Whitman: Oh I interviewed her more than once yes.

Suterwalla: Oh right, okay. Please say more.

Whitman: I mean she was one of my main heroines and her clothing was of great interest to me and mine.

Suterwalla: Because she had a stall at World's End didn't she?

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: Did you go down there?

Whitman: No I don't think so. I mean I did go down, I didn't go to her stall but I did go down to Fulham or wherever it was to interview her. Oh yes there's another photo of me.

Suterwalla: Oh brilliant.

Whitman: So yes Poly Styrene was great. So this...the 1977 that was the big...there was the big anti fascist march in Lewisham and there'd been one in Wood... That was probably Wood Green, that one.

Suterwalla: Right. Where are you getting these images, from the local press?

Whitman: No, that would be from *Socialist Worker* again. So this was it you see. I wanted to actually point out to people that there was nothing funny or interesting or daring about you know sort of playing with fascist imagery and what it actually meant. So again very polemical but had to sort of end on a light note so I wrote 'Scooby Dooby Doo'.

Whitman: Yes I'm afraid to say. Anyway so that was number three. And we've missed out number two.

Suterwalla: Do you not have number two at all?

Whitman: Yes I do I'll show you it. It's just that somehow... I think you asked about sexuality so I...that's why I came up with that.

This is number two our Jubilee Issue.

Suterwalla: So what was the timeframe? How often were you producing this?

Whitman: Oh well it wasn't regular. I did, I think I did...well I did three in the space of about six months and that was it. Never did anymore. I think the reason I stopped doing it was because that's when I got involved with 'Rock Against Racism' and you know couldn't really do both. And that was kind of my outlet.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So this was number two.

Suterwalla: Oh this is the cheeky one.

Whitman: And again. Yes I have to give my sister credit she did this as well. The thing was that...you know since...it's very hard to put yourself back into that time, particularly if you've grown up since that time. Because this was very very iconoclastic. I mean I know 'The Sex Pistols' did it too but we were all kind of doing it at once. The Jubilee was a big deal and there was still enough of kind of a little Britain mentality to sort of...the majority of people and certainly the TV and all that were all very excited about the fact that it was the Queen's jubilee. So there's just a sort of small minority of people who were saying, you know 'Yah boo.' To the Jubilee. But this is very interesting because we thought this was a hilarious it was...you know we thought this was absolutely hilarious to depict the Queen as a punk. When I joined *Spare Rib* Amanda Sebastian from *Spare Rib* who I still see from time to time she really took me to task for this. And she said she found this a really misogynist image. And she said 'And look at the way, you know it's so...the trousers are so tight, it's all scrumpled round her crotch.' And I just thought this was hilarious, you know that...

And when I joined *Spare Rib* I really had quite a battle on my hands to explain punk to the older generation of feminists who didn't get it basically. I mean how you could think that was a misogynist image is still beyond me actually but she... I don't know how she was reading it exactly but she

missed the point that it was a joke and it was a parody. And that it was this...again it's this juxtaposition thing because of all things you wouldn't expect the Queen to be dressed in black plastic trousers as a punk.

Suterwalla: Can I just...can we just develop that a bit more before we go on to look at this which is that what's this division that you're highlighting between the feminists and the ultra ultra feminists and punks? Because I thought that punk was kind of coming out of this wave?

Whitman: Oh not at all. No and actually Linda Grant interviewed me about this a long time ago.

Suterwalla: The author?

Whitman: The author Linda Grant. She wrote a book and before you came I was kind of looking through various bits and pieces. And she came to interview me because she was writing about women and clothing and feminism and so forth. And she sort of...

Suterwalla: Oh yes I know her book about clothing.

Whitman: Right. Okay well she was out of the country between 1975 and 1978 and she came back and this revolution had happened. And she came back sort of dressed as a hippie and was very embarrassed. But she didn't really know what was going on. And she interviewed me, it was 1992 or something.

Feminism in the 1970s before punk was...the uniform that was dungarees...And music was acoustic folk from America- all very gentle, nothing macho, nothing aggressive... there wasn't any kind of diversity, so it was all terribly wholesome and very, you know anti-capitalist, anti... you know eau natural...and this thing about sort of not wearing clothes to attract men which is probably why people started wearing dungarees. Anyway I have to say I never wore a pair of dungarees in my life and I found out it aesthetically very unpleasing, this kind of thing. But that was the norm.

The women at *Spare Rib*, well I don't know if they were all wearing dungarees but certainly some of the collective were and certainly no make-up. The appearance was, 'We are not trying to attract men and we won't sort of have our hair done in a hairdressers things and so forth.'

So when I got to *Spare Rib* I had to really explain punk to the older generation of feminists. And when I say older generation they were only about five years older than me. But actually...then what happened was within a year or two punk fashion completely took over the women's movement.

But about punk clothing it was very, it was...for me it was liberating because it was totally the opposite of the sort of feminine attire which young women were supposed to wear. And I think it...

Suterwalla: So are you talking more about the kind of androgyny of it as opposed to the more sexualised style of punk?

Whitman: Yes. You see, yes.

Suterwalla: Because there's so many layers to it?

Whitman: Yes. I mean I was never...certainly never ever into the hypersexualised because as a feminist I just thought 'Rubbish. There's nothing challenging about this. It's just porn really.' So that, I didn't ever find that challenging or appealing to me. And I could see that it was very very easy for that to be...what's the word? You know...absorbed. And in fact that strand of it has, you know been absorbed into the mainstream with, I feel disastrous consequences. But I wouldn't blame that on punk it's just that everything became more hypersexualised really.

And it's quite funny because the sort of things which as feminists we were complaining about which were sexist in the '70s is so tame now compared to what is, you know kind of all around us now, on billboards and everything and videos. I mean we thought Pan's People and that were sexist and they were sexist but it seems utterly chaste compared to Pussycat Dolls or something, you know. So that's another story in a way.

Yes, for me it was the androgyny which was, you know, perfectly possible. So that was exciting and thrilling for me. I think for any young woman who was uncertain about their sexuality it was a good cover as well because you could look quite dykey but you could just say you were a punk. So, you know you didn't have...you could be making a statement without making yourself vulnerable.

Although actually just being a punk did put you out there. I did, you know have people laughing at me sometimes. And it was quite funny because my sister although she did all this for me she didn't like punk. And she didn't...she couldn't stand the gigs so she never used to come to any of the gigs but she quite enjoyed, you know the fun visual side of it. But if we walked along the road together I would like...I would walk very fast and I was often a little bit ahead of her and she said 'People would be really staring at me as I went past.' So of course as I say I never looked like Jordan. You've seen some of the photos it's just very short jagged hair and like a plastic jacket and the narrowest trousers I could find.

Suterwalla: Right so let's... How did you get your clothes? And what did you wear, how did you put it together, and why? I'd like to talk specifically about your punk dress and style now.

Whitman: Right. I used to go into charity shops.

Suterwalla: Right.

Whitman: And I have...I just have to go and get you the small number of clothes which I've still got which I brought down.

Now this coat...now I'm probably. This coat definitely comes from the '60s, and I must have got it in the charity shop. I wasn't actually wearing it in 1976 but I did wear it to Greenham Common in 1981.

Suterwalla: Oh brilliant.

Whitman: So I was wearing that. I'll put it on if you like.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: And actually it's so nice and it's got, you know it sort of came back into fashion a couple of years ago so I got it relined and started wearing it again.

Suterwalla: Yes it looks very contemporary.

Whitman: Well it looks totally contemporary but it's...so it is a '60. So as I say I wasn't wearing this in 1976 but if I'd got it I would have if you see what I mean. You know if I'd had it.

What I...the thing I remember most wearing which I don't have anymore was a horrible... It was a black plastic jacket, it wasn't leather. I wouldn't wear a leather jacket because I'm vegetarian...But it was black plastic and...

Suterwalla: Where did you get it from?

Whitman: Do you know I can't remember. That must have come from a charity shop, you know that was where I got it...One of my favourite things was very much the Poly Styrene look...It's like a two piece...it was my Granny's and it came from Marks and Spencer's. So she must have bought it in the '60s in Marks and Spencer's.

Sadly I can't put it on now much to... I've put on a lot of weight because I was very...I was a skinny bean pole in those days. And this was absolutely beautiful. When I was in the second band 'Soul Sister' so that was 1981 I did wear this then. It's quite weird because look it doesn't... It's got a jacket and they never sort of made that into a proper dress. So...

Suterwalla: Oh it's quite punky and it's sort of...

Whitman: I was very punky that's the thing. That is the thing. I mean I think it's absolutely gorgeous. It's sort of Audrey Hepburn.

Suterwalla: Because you can see the stitching almost. It's quite crude...

Whitman: Yes. But you see that wasn't supposed to be shown. That wouldn't have been... You see nowadays you could wear something but that was regarded...that was like underwear then.

Suterwalla: Underwear as outerwear...a punky theme? Did you...

Whitman: Yes, you weren't supposed to show seams and stuff like that. That's why this was so interesting.

Suterwalla: And where did you get this?

Whitman: I can't remember. So again it must have been the charity shop. That's one of my favourite things and it's a sadness to me that I can no longer fit into it.

Well, the thing was that for me Poly Styrene's way of dressing was my, you know, chosen way of dressing. And I loved...I just loved wearing...like a parody of a middle-aged woman...

Suterwalla: But subverted?

Whitman: But subverted because I was so young and wearing it, and it's obviously for an older lady, and it was just...I just used to really enjoy wearing it. So when I went to...in issue number two of *Jolt* I went to... There was a shop in Brixton called Pollocks which was run by a friend. And he did...it was called Pollocks because he used to...Pollock shirts. So in other words you know a sort of spat of paint all over them. And...

Suterwalla: Oh, I see.

Whitman: I used to get them. I mixed a whole load of different things, very unconventional. There's just. There's a bit of a...there, there we are. Look that's one of his shirts, okay.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So when I went there to do the interview I was wearing the suit.

Suterwalla: Oh yes. And did you customise things?

Whitman: Yes so that, what I did there, that is one of the shirts. So I must have photocopied the shirt and then typed on to the photocopy and then printed it from that in the fanzine or something.

Suterwalla: It's so creative.

Whitman: Well it was good fun, it was such good fun. That was the thing.

Suterwalla: Can you talk to me about getting in the everyday, and how that might have differed from getting dressed to go to a gig? Or getting dressed for an occasion?

Whitman: Oh I tell you something which is just awful. I mean I had this...now I look back on it, it was rather horrid but it was a sort of dull turquoise dress which was probably made... It was like somebody's...it was a uniform. So may be

for a ca-, somebody working in catering or something and cotton dress. So it was quite strange. And I went to a gig in that and I also remember going to the Notting Hill Carnival wearing that as well.

Suterwalla: With your hair cut by yourself?

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: And makeup?

Whitman: No I didn't... I haven't worn makeup for years. When I was very, you know when I was a teenager I did wear makeup. Then when it came to punk I sometimes used to wear lipstick because I had some quite manly jackets and I quite liked sort of you know lipstick and the manly jacket. And then my sister went to Egypt and came back with some kohl and for a while I went round with my eyes, with kohl on for about I don't know six months or something and then I just stopped, couldn't be bothered.

Suterwalla: Interesting that you were wearing men's clothes with lipstick.

Whitman: Oh absolutely, there was nothing pretty about it. It was a bit colourful, shocking. And I remember going to...there was a women's house in Wales called 'Oaklands'. It was like a feminist retreat and you go down and stay there. And I went down there with all my punky looks and my kohl round my eyes and that. And they kind of...you know sort of caused a bit of a shockwaves there because I didn't look like a typical feminist. Anyway when I was wearing that...this dress, I mean it wasn't horrid it's just... It was...there's nothing glamorous about it at all but interesting to wear it to a gig, it's quite of dull and shapeless. But something really shocking happened which was that, at that particular gig a man said to me 'Oh you look fantastic. You look like you've just come out of Belsen and I mean that in the best possible way.' And I just thought 'What an idiot.' You know because I was very thin. This is the thing I was very very thin and with my very short hair and I'm quite pale.

Suterwalla: That's shocking. The connections with Nazism again, through dress and the body.

Whitman: I know it is unbelievable isn't it. But then you know if 'The Sex Pistols' could do a song 'Belsen Was a Gas', you know it just goes to show that people weren't really thinking clearly. If they could...you know.

Suterwalla: Yes. So this is almost like dressing up in your grandmother's clothes. It's kind of...it's nothing. I mean I absolutely wouldn't have associated these with creating a punk look at all.

Whitman: Yes but you must have seen all the photos of Poly Styrene and she often used to wear suits like that. So these are suits from like the 50s, and there's a 50s and 60s spin to all of this, matching colours and fitted jackets and twin sets.

Suterwalla: Yes. There's no safety pin in sight, there's no Mohican in sight. There's no bondage stuff in sight. It's more like what we would now call vintage.

Whitman: Absolutely, that's right.

Suterwalla: There are no fishnets in sight. I mean all the clichés have been completely broken.

Whitman: Good. Yes and I never wore any of those things. But look...

Suterwalla: What about shoes?

Whitman: Oh god, yes. I...again well you see it did all come from charity shops. I had, I found these wonderful flat pointy red shoes which were quite comfortable and I used to wear them a lot. I found it did...shoes were always the problem actually because shoes are always the give away, you know. And I've got a piece in one of the *Temporary Hoarding* issues about shoes and fascism and I'd write about... Because I got some stilettos, I got them for 25p, charity shop. And I wore them about twice but I just...when I say stilettos they were high for then but not like now. And they were just so impossible to walk about in that I actually wrote about it and said 'No this is a silly thing to do. There's nothing revolutionary about wearing stilettos.'

Suterwalla: Revolutionary? In what way?

Whitman: In terms of the aesthetic it was very much a '60. You see it's so odd to me now because obviously the '60s was only 10 years before this but it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So I had always loved the Shangri-Las right? This was one of my favourite records. But if you look at that you can see exactly the same aesthetic. So that's the Shangri-Las so that's the '60s.

Suterwalla: Yes, I see how you make that connection...

Whitman: Now do you know anything about The Raincoats?

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: Yes because I mean it's interesting because if you just look at them again I mean they're a tiny bit late, they were a little bit later but the main thing was not to look feminine, not to look like you're in a glossy magazine.

Suterwalla: Yes. Can you talk more about not looking feminine?

Whitman: Okay. And...

Suterwalla: But it's not Mohicans this stuff?

Whitman: No, no. Did you ever see the Frank or hear about the Frank Chickens? Do you know about the Frank Chickens?

Suterwalla: No.

Whitman: Oh they're wonderful. They're Japanese women living in London and they did a fantastic double act. Well they were very very visual and very sort of probably art school influenced I'm sure. But they were very funny, very funny. It was like a sort of cabaret act really.

Suterwalla: Ah yes. I'd like to return to what you said about not looking feminine. How important was that? Was that a general theme in punk?

Whitman: Yes, sure. Now these...these obviously these are all '80s actually but you know see I really like the sort of the sculptured look again completely androgynous. And Lori Anderson again she was sort of '80s but interesting.

Suterwalla: Post punk?

Whitman: Yes, yes. But she must have been influenced by punk.

Suterwalla: Amazing to see the originals. You've got the most wonderful collection of stuff I mean we've got to look after this. It's so special.

Whitman: Yes. And I had these Elektraset things and I thought they were so lovely.

Suterwalla: Oh I remember Elektraset.

Whitman: Yes and you probably have seen that article that I did 'Women and Popular Music' in *Spare Rib*?

Suterwalla: Oh yes, yes.

Whitman: Because that's where I got the little image, it was my Elektraset. Where is it? That, yes.

Suterwalla: Oh yes. This is *Spare Rib*'s logo.

Whitman: Yes it is. I mean but that must...I mean obviously there's a whole *Spare Rib* archive so that's not that hard to find. So...

Suterwalla: Yes in the Women's Library?

Whitman: Yes. So I mean this is from punk.

Suterwalla: Is that you?

Whitman: Yes it is. So that, yes so that's number three. Okay. But you see then this is me posing. So I mean the whole thing and the word 'poser' and 'posing', you know was people did pose literally and figuratively. People would mock each other for posing but punk was entirely about posing. It was about dressing up and putting on an act that's what it was about. Well the music in the early '70s was dreadful it was all those awful dinosaur bands and Gary

Glitter and you know. All the so called progressive bands of the late '60s had become very very technological and they just did bigger and bigger and bigger gigs. And they're completely divorced from their audience. And so all the energies, the kind of the '60s had gone and it had just become a horrible big monstrous machine really, unconnected from fans. So people, you know young people just thought this was terribly terribly boring and wanted to inject a bit of life into it. At the same time there was, you know growing unemployment. I mean the interesting this is this was before Thatcher. Because when you think about it you think it to be, I mean we thought it was bad then but things became so much worse under Thatcher. But actually in the build up, you know there was high unemployment and a lot of boredom. And...so it was just a sort of combination of...I mean obviously there were some people who sort of triggered things off, you know Malcolm McLaren and I don't have any, you know I wouldn't rate him highly. But I think he was quite influential, you know.

Suterwalla: Did you ever go to SEX?

Whitman: No, no. So you see because I was...I absolutely wasn't interested in any of that bondage type stuff. The only reason it was...one of the things I said to Linda Grant which I've, you know just seen in my notes was that in those days if anybody was in to S&M it would've been a secret. It wouldn't be something that you talked about in polite society with. Everything's become much more open now. So it was shocking for people to see people you know wearing that kind of bondage gear out in the wide world as it were. But I think if punks wore it.

Suterwalla: Was that the point, that it was shocking and so people wanted to kind of address the taboo, or make it...you know stop it being a dirty secret sort of thing?

Whitman: Yes. But the thing was it didn't...basically but it didn't mean if you...if the people who wore it probably were not into S&M at all, you know it was just wearing it as a fashion statement. So it didn't actually make a statement about their sexuality it was just saying 'Yah boo.' To, you know the powers that be. And I just thought it was hilarious seeing people trying to walk about in bondage clothes because you couldn't walk in them, that was the thing. And I just thought it was funny. So a song like 'Oh Bondage Up Yours!' I just thought was, for me it was just about saying, you know 'I

want to be free.' Basically, you know it wasn't anything to do with S&M. It was just about, you know I'm not going to be a slave to anybody, basically.

Suterwalla: What's the connection between punk and sexuality for you then?

Whitman: Well I think...what I said earlier about it was kind of safe space to look androgynous and so there was that. I suppose it was also...it was at that time that I was questioning my sexuality so it's associated in my personal development, you know it's just the same period of time and that first difficult relationship with another woman was all part of that same excitement of that same period. And then there's the whole thing about punk was...it just gave much more space to young women to explore different roles basically. So...

Suterwalla: In what way?

Whitman: Well male punks were still sexist so it wasn't like...I can't say it was a non-sexist movement but it was very egalitarian. And partly the fact that boys who couldn't play their instruments were starting bands meant that girls who couldn't play instruments could also start bands. And...so there was that egalitarianism because it was very much a do-it-yourself type of thing. So you didn't have to have any technical expertise to be in a punk band. And then...

Suterwalla: Or put a fanzine together?

Whitman: To put a fanzine together...you just had to have a bit of energy, creativity, good sense of humour. So a lot of girls did join bands or form bands and I just...I thought it was great. But you know I couldn't track down any...I interviewed all the women bands you know either right back then or for *Spare Rib* or whatever. So over a period of five years I interviewed lots of them and none of them would say they were feminists. And I was in...do you know anything about 'Rock Against Sexism' because I was also involved in that.

Suterwalla: Yes I have read about it, and how it came about.

Whitman: Oh I'll have to show you a whole load of other stuff. And I really do have to put this archive where it can be accessed. But anyway basically none of these, you know very very few of the bands or the women involved in them

would call themselves feminists. Because they, you know they kind of ran a mile from that. But actually what they were saying. Like, well The Slits lyrics and some of Souxsie, even Siouxsie and the Banshees lyrics and definitely Poly Styrene's lyrics are all about challenging, you know a feminine stereotype role.

Suterwalla: Yes. Can you tell me more how, in your view, you think they did this? Whether they were successful?

Whitman: Yes because it was really empowering. But for some women, well why do women run away from being called feminists now? That hasn't changed. Women don't like to have a label. They don't...they think it might put men off. They think it sounds boring. They think it's restrictive and they don't have a high consciousness of these matters, you know. I think, you know there's no other explanation really is there.

Suterwalla: Right.

Whitman: So...you know. But afterwards, you know sort of a little bit later The Raincoats and Delta 5 and some of the more politicised bands certainly did have a feminist consciousness and the 'Au Pairs'. All of those bands. So they're kind of early '80s bands. They definitely were feminist and writing really interesting lyrics.

Suterwalla: So you're drawing a connection between feminism, as we think of it in terms of the Women's Liberation Movement, and punk?

Whitman: Yes but it had come out of it, that's where it came from, the women's movement as well as other things. That's where it came from and it came out of this do it yourself thing so that was why it was exciting. So I think...

Suterwalla: How important was it to transform the female body? To transform it away from stereotypes? Did you have piercings and things like that?

Whitman: No I didn't. You see because I didn't... No only my earrings. I used to...yes I used to. I wonder if I've still got any of the earrings and all my earrings were jokes actually. I've probably got a few of them but I haven't got many, they just became. Because they were all cracked to start with actually. You're probably much more technically savvy than me and I might have to ask for your help to get all my stuff, you know to upload all my stuff.

Suterwalla: Well I was just thinking about how I'm going to be able to use these. Because obviously they are...I need to really weed through them.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: I wonder about scanning? I mean it probably wouldn't take that long to scan them in.

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: And that would give us an opportunity to have them, you know have them digitally filed.

Whitman: Yes well we definitely need to do that. I haven't got, I mean those were earrings. I had those as earrings, right.

Suterwalla: Could I see them better?

Whitman: I mean they're not earrings anymore because they came off their fastening. But I mean I must have made them, I probably made them, you know by which I mean they probably weren't earrings.

Suterwalla: Oh yes, right. So you took stuff you found and made them?

Whitman: But I adapted them into earrings. Sadly I haven't got much. That's probably about it. I had various clip on things, you know really...I mean it was very kitsch that's what it boils down to. I mean it was just basically very kitsch. I used to have... I certainly had an Eiffel Tower. I think I used to wear that sort of pinned to my black plastic jacket.

Suterwalla: And those are from charity shops?

Whitman: No they wouldn't have been from charity shops. I mean wherever you buy trinkets I suppose I don't know. That's probably about it. I mean you could see these...now these ones I don't think I... I didn't have them at the time but that's the sort of thing I would've worn if I had had them if you see what I mean.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: So basically just very very kitsch.

Suterwalla: They're brilliant.

Whitman: What it boils down to. The rest of this stuff is my kind of earring archive but it basically comes from the '80s more than the '70s. In fact I had these little...

Suterwalla: How much effort would you put in to getting dressed to go out?

Whitman: I had those. My friend Sue...

Suterwalla: Oh they're cool.

Whitman: Yes I've got the other one. My friend Sue had a little plastic rat that she made into an earring. And we would often wear odd earrings, you know it wouldn't be the same. How much effort? Well...ah that's a very good question. Basically I wouldn't make a huge effort because I didn't wear makeup so of course that takes sort of a lot of time out of the equation. But I would, I suppose... Now I'd probably get dressed very very quickly but a lot of thought would have gone into what I was going to wear.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: And I remember...

Suterwalla: Would you discuss it like with your sister and?

Whitman: No, no I did it very much on my own.

Suterwalla: Especially what about when you were getting up on stage as a band?

Whitman: Well that, yes we'd certainly I mean, you know we certainly agreed our clothes there. And again you know they were just basically joke clothes but... Oh that's the 'Frank Chickens' and again.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: Well it was just, you know a dressing up box, that's what it was.

Suterwalla: I mean so much of it just feels like costume. Was that important, the theatricality? And so tell me more about dressing up to go out or on stage?

Whitman: Yes exactly that's what it was. It was dressing up. And most punks it was dressing up as well it wasn't just me and...

Suterwalla: And so that's the fun aspect as well and there's mockery and the irony and...?

Whitman: Yes that's right. And so if you are wearing something like gold lame or whatever it's gold lame as a joke not gold lame to make yourself look glamorous, you know.

Suterwalla: Yes. But it's interesting that you feel... certainly in the early phase in '76 that influence of Dadaism that you mentioned earlier, there's a real sense of joking and carnival, and that this is disruptive. Did you want to be disruptive? Was being oppositional important to you?

Whitman: But you see that was probably there. People like Malcolm McLaren knew about all of that, you know so they...

Suterwalla: So were you directly influenced by that?

Whitman: Yes. But I can't over emphasise the influence of Patti Smith. Now I don't know what happened to it I had to have the Horses album and that photo. I remember the first time I saw the photo of Patti Smith it was in WH Smith in Crouch End and there was a big promotion so the photo was all over. And I was just kind of gob smacked by this amazing image because she looked so androgynous and this was...

Suterwalla: Ah yes the image with the white shirt and jacket?

Whitman: I think this was 1975. Yes she was wearing a tie.

Suterwalla: And her choppy hair.

Whitman: And you couldn't really tell whether she was... You could tell she was a woman but she looked such, like such a boyish woman. And I just found that really thrilling. And I went to see Patti Smith.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Whitman: So that...and so that was before and again you know it was my sister's boyfriend Ian who, you know had his finger on the pulse so he said 'Oh we must go and see Patti Smith.' So we did at the Roundhouse so that was 1975 I think. So that was before punk started in England but very very influential.

Suterwalla: So that was more your influence than kind of the Siouxsie Sioux, that line and style?

Whitman: Much more so.

Suterwalla: Patti Smith, then Poly Styrene with the irony?

Whitman: Yes, so yes for me my personal take on it was an androgynous look, very ambiguous as to whether, you know male/female, gay/straight, you know: what is this creature? And then the Poly Styrene ironic kitsch, twinset and pearls type of look, which I just thought was hilarious. But I also find it quite attractive aesthetically, you know. And I think it was...was because I'd been through it, you know I wore these long floppy dresses before...you know in the early '70s, you know I sewed. I actually made these long paisley dresses and flopped about and had my hair...my hair was long and permed. And you just looked like this kind of really soft feminine thing. And I just rejected that completely and just wanted a much more crisp edgy look, you know. And the kind of...that '60s look of sort of fluorescent colours and sharp lines, I've just found so much more appealing basically.

Suterwalla: Okay, that's very interesting, that distinction, and drawing the lines around your influences. And to what extent has punk influenced the rest of your life? And have you kept that punk aesthetic with you?

Whitman: Yes I have. I have as far as possible. Yes I have. I mean I find it very difficult to buy trousers for example which are kind of wide rather than narrow. I can't always buy the things which I want to buy but I would always look for that kind of thing.

Suterwalla: What was the narrow trousers?

Whitman: Well it's just a '60s look basically. So my thing as a punk, you know...

Suterwalla: Oh okay.

Whitman: Yes, yes. Just drainpipe trousers. And also it was a reaction to flares. You see you don't know that the plague of flares which was around in the 1970s, you know. Everybody wore trousers like tents. So you know it just...

Suterwalla: Yes and there's the platforms and stuff?

Whitman: Yes, guilty, guilty. Yes. So I can't, you know obviously there's a sort of limit to how much, you know I couldn't continue just to dress from charity shops forever. But yes I think it has stayed with me. I mean I've always had short hair. Mind you my hair is very thin and feeble so there's no point in me growing it anyway. But I always do have short hair and... Yes I think that's always what I'm aspiring too even though I can't, you know can't usually get the clothes which I have in my mind's eye. And I'm not prepared to put a lot of time into it either, you know because life is too short really.

Suterwalla: Can I ask you then was your dress...certainly during punk and then even after punk...was it about resistance?

Whitman: I think it was definitely. Absolutely. Why would I worn that pink nylon party frock for God's sake?!

Suterwalla: Would you wear that just during the day?

Whitman: No that was...it was for special occasions such as going on a demonstration perhaps or for performing.

Suterwalla: What would you have done during normal days? Kept it up more or less?

Whitman: Well just, you know just, yes toned down a bit, yes. I wish I...you know it just didn't occur to me at the time but I do wish I had some kind of record, photos. I just didn't bother at the time. But back to resistance, yes absolutely. What I was resisting...I always have hated, and I still hate, feminine attire. I cannot stand the fact if you go to any shop now all the t-shirts have got frills or puffed sleeves or embroidery or little bows and ties and everything. I just want something plain, I hate it. And so I absolutely have ever since punk have resisted a feminine attire which is not to say that

I don't ever...I wear skirts, I wear dresses. But usually with something to counteract it. And I think it is to do with I just can't bear...To me conventional feminine clothing is anathema and I just associate it with the oppression of women. I mean it's...you know nobody's ever asked me that question before but that is definitely what is going on in my mind. I still dress in a punky way, it hasn't left me. My hair is still short.

Suterwalla: Yes. Did you encounter violence or sexism during the punk phase at gigs and things? Was there a negative side that you'd like to share?

Whitman: Do you mean just going on in general or?

Suterwalla: Towards yourself. I mean did you feel threatened was that...

Whitman: Yes sometimes. Now I do...I remember but also because of the kind of jokiness you could sort of... I mean I told you the thing about the Belsen which I was completely and utterly...

Suterwalla: Yes that's shocking.

Whitman: ...shocked, you know. Yes well, you know I couldn't ever forget that. I do remember going, walking along the road and this was probably Kentish Town or something. And I was in my daytime punk gear.

Suterwalla: Which was?

Whitman: I can't remember but I would've been wearing my black plastic jacket. I would've been wearing, you know narrow trousers, black plastic jacket, little t-shirt and my short hair. And...

Suterwalla: DM's and things or was it too early?

Whitman: It was a little bit too early for DMs. I don't know what my footwear was it could've been these red pointy flat shoes that I love. And then there were two boys behind me and they started laughing, it wasn't threatening but they were being rude. And I remember turning round and saying 'I'm not here for your fucking entertainment, you know.'

Suterwalla: Yeah...

Whitman: And they were kind of a bit taken aback. And I remember another time when I was wearing this famous black plastic jacket and it's boiling hot. And I was really sweating inside it and some people started laughing at me because they could see that it was actually very unsuitable for the weather. But I must tell you...

Suterwalla: Did that detach from your sense of empowerment at all?

Whitman: No, no, no. Because it was obviously making other people feel uncomfortable so that was good. The idea was to make other people feel uncomfortable. But, having said that, very important thing, Wood Green demonstration against the National Front early 1977 it was a big, you know at the time the National Front were determined to march through areas with big black population and they went to Wood Green in the Spring and Lewisham in the August. And huge mobilisation of anti fascist forces against them.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Whitman: And I, you know went along in my punk regalia and went... I don't know I was at... Somehow or other I was meeting somebody at somebody else's house. I haven't the faintest idea who. And I rang the doorbell and whoever opened the door is not somebody I knew and they were a bit shocked by my appearance. They thought I might be a fascist. And that was a worry to me because they found my appearance to be threatening. And later on in the '80s I had a relationship with an Asian woman who had lived in terror throughout the whole punk era and as an Asian woman she felt really threatened by punk. It was too aggressive, too...she was basically an old hippie although she's the same age as me.

Suterwalla: But the connotations with fascism can at times seem overt.

Whitman: She found it...yes. So she found it very very threatening. And she found the whole ugliness of the aesthetic and the aggression very very threatening. So, you know I had to recognise sort of afterwards that some people... Although as I say I wasn't wearing safety pins or wasn't wearing bondage gear or whatever but my appearance was so kind of off the norm that people did find it very unsettling.

Suterwalla: Yes. And you enjoyed that?

Whitman: And obviously I don't mind if some people find it unsettling but I don't want, you know I don't want my allies to find it unsettling. And I remember, have you heard of The Gang of Four, the band, Gang of Four? The drummer used to have a...used to have very very, you know skinhead haircut and eventually he grew his hair out. And he said he didn't. He said it's because, you know he didn't want to get on the bus and people kind of, you know the black person would move away so that he wasn't sitting next to them, kind of thing. He realised that his appearance was actually threatening to just general people who wouldn't know what was going on in his mind, basically. So that was interesting. But what...we also used to be festooned in badges.

Suterwalla: Oh yes of course. Yes, can we have a look?

Whitman: I have my badge collection. And I would be wearing quite a lot of these all at once, you know to go out with about eight badges on. Now they're not, obviously they're not all from, you know they're not really 1976. A lot of them are a bit later 1978 maybe.

Suterwalla: Can I just have a look?

Whitman: Yes.

Suterwalla: Right so you'd have?

Whitman: Well just trying to look at the...I mean some of them are later still because like 'Don't do it Di' is obviously 1981 because that's when the Royal Wedding took place.

Suterwalla: Those are great.

Whitman: Yes. Where is 'Don't do it Di', I can't see it.

Suterwalla: 'Don't do it Di'.

Whitman: Oh there it is. I knew it was there I just couldn't see it. I remember...

Suterwalla: Yes, can you tell me what these meant to you? Why were you wearing them? So like badges of statement and badges of association?

Whitman: Yes. I'm trying to find... can you see The Gay News badge? Because Gay... I can't see it there. Gay News had this big legal battle in 1978 and I was doing a part-time job. I'd graduated doing a part-time job at Westfield College, just a typing job but I... And I had to somehow find a way of dressing which would work in a kind of conventional office but didn't betray my punkness which I found quite hard.

Suterwalla: Yes. That's very interesting to, exploring what happened in the everyday, how you managed everyday to keep your punk identity and your work life or other types of life...

Whitman: And also I did have this badge on my coat, not on my indoor clothing but on my coat which was 'Gay News Fights Back'. And it was a picture of Mary Whitehouse with 'Gay News Fights Back'. And nobody ever commented on it but it was there and my coat used to hang on the door and you could always see it hanging there.

Suterwalla: And this was in the '80s now?

Whitman: Well no it wasn't it was 1978.

Suterwalla: Oh yes sorry.

Whitman: Yes I'd only just graduated. I don't know what that badge isn't there. But anyway.

Suterwalla: So you kept up the identity when you went to work?

Whitman: Yes I tried to but I had to... yes I mean again, you know as a feminist and there is a photo of me wearing that coat. Where are we? Just trying to... I can't remember where... oh there we are. So that was 1981.

Suterwalla: Oh my goodness. Oh that's brilliant, so early on. Right at the beginning really.

Whitman: Yes. See now look that's a good photo of me 1977 okay. So you can see I'm not in bondage, I'm not wearing anything startling but actually that was still quite a scary appearance for the day, for those days. But you see how thin I was. Oh I must get this scanned...

[Interview diverts to talking about scanning documents, about making photocopies of fanzine issues and other logistical matters about primary sources, archives, and about contacting other potential interview participants. There is also a discussion about my chapter deadline before the interview ends. Since this section of the transcript does not refer to Whitman's experiences as a punk is not included here].

End

## Chapter 2 The Greenham Layer: 1981-86

### Rebecca Johnson

Interview date: 4 March 2009.

Location: National Portrait Gallery Café, London.

Duration of interview: 2 hours.

Start

Suterwalla: So perhaps, just as a starting point, if you wouldn't mind telling me where you came from and where you were born? What sort of family you came from and whether feminism or the peace movement had been part of your background? How you discovered it, as a process of getting yourself to the camp.

Johnson: Okay. Well, I was raised partly in the US, in North Dakota and Pennsylvania, and partly in the UK as part of a large family that was part of a religious community that dated back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was, to sort of generalise, it was sort of Christian, socialist, pacifist and Puritan. So it was a somewhat weird mixture. So pacifism was something that I drew in with my mother's milk. Actually, it wasn't just my mother's milk. I ended up having milk from quite a lot other women, because my mother was quite ill when she had me. But that was all part of the community, was this sharing. Holding things in common within the community. But then there was a kind of sense of the rest of the world somehow were on a path to hell. So you didn't have much to do with it. We lived in closed communities within the United States and within Britain.

Suterwalla: Were these alternative religious communities?

Johnson: Yes. They dated literally back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were pacifists and they resisted war. So they were very involved – in fact how my parents got involved, because my parents came from over here. One from a Welsh family, one from an English family. My parents got involved before the Second World War at a time when Jewish kids were being transported out of Germany. They were involved in helping the kids to escape and find homes and to find schools and things. So their version of pacifism was not just sitting back and not doing anything, but actually actively trying to prevent conflict and actively trying to protect people who were being singled out and made, you know, vulnerable or attacked. So at its core were

actually a lot of the values that I've carried on in my life with. Which are things like nonviolence, and a belief that all people are – well, I mean, there was a contradiction in the community. Because there was both this kind of belief that all people were valued and valuable. Then there was this closed community, which actually treated the rest of the world as if it wasn't. So in North Dakota –

Suterwalla: So was this like a sort of Mormon community or something?

Johnson: No, it was actually Hutterite.

Suterwalla: Right, right.

Johnson: You'd have to look them up because most people would confuse them with Amish.

Suterwalla: How do you spell...?

Johnson: HUTTERITE. The value systems were that basically, you either married, in which case you had as many children as God gave you. That's why I'm the youngest of eight.

Suterwalla: Really. Oh!

Johnson: You know, which was quite hard on my mum. But then a lot of that work was shared.

Suterwalla: Yes, you get that in community don't you.

Johnson: Or you were single, in which case you had to be completely single. So they were very puritanical in the sense of no sex outside marriage and, not that this kind of thing affected me, because I was very young. My family actually left in '62. But my parents still retained those values of sort of worshipping God with their hands. But it was really about, you live your life. You don't just go to a church and worship. You live your life as an act of worship in a sense.

Suterwalla: It sounds very up to date with identity politics at the moment actually. Because I come from a Muslim background. It's resonating.

Johnson: Yes. Well, I have to say, I mean, I've got a number of Muslim friends. When we have talked about some of this stuff, and particularly some of the women who are living under Muslim laws, and women against fundamentalism. Because in fact, my upbringing was a fundamentalist upbringing. I mean, there were very good things about it. There were also very, very bad things about it. As I got older, the bad things would have got much worse for me. Because I was already a fairly rebellious kid. It got very, very hard for some of my older brothers and sisters, as they came to puberty and began to rebel on things. Then the clamping down of this puritanism outweighed the relative freedom of the pacifist socialism and the holding things in common. You know, I mean, for small child it was –

Suterwalla: Is this in the '60s?

Johnson: Well, it was '50s and early '60s with our family. But, I mean, the community, as I say, has been going on for hundreds of years, in one form or another.

Suterwalla: Yes. That sense of rebellion. Particularly in that period was really...

Johnson: Yes. Well, that was part of I think what – and that caused, both the community to close its doors and to close in. Because the young people, and I'm talking particularly in America at the time, North Dakota and Pennsylvania, and the young people were seeing this life outside the community and listening to things like Elvis clandestinely. They were seeing this other world. They were having to go to a high school. In some cases to a college of, you know – in case of my elder brother wanted to be a doctor. The community wanted a doctor. He was seeing these other experiences. Then coming back into this closed community. It resulted in enormous tensions, which I was only a little bit aware of as a child. Partly because they resulted eventually, over a course of two or three years, with quite a lot of hardship for our family and then our family leaving. Then we were kind of stuck in America until we could get enough money together. Then it was only the youngest half of the family that my parents could afford to bring back to England.

Suterwalla: Right. When was that?

- Johnson: That was in '62 you see. Then we were misfits in England. You know, we didn't speak English with proper accents. Actually in some ways, although we were white –
- Suterwalla: Did you move to London?
- Johnson: No, no, no. We moved to where my father could get a job, which was actually the Sussex coast. But the interesting thing is, that although we were obviously completely white and therefore – and I mean, my father did inform us – well, I think I was the only one that really needed informing, because I think the others knew – that we were British. On the boat going from New York to Southampton, that this was supposed to be home. Of course we got here, I didn't feel like this was home at all. Because of our different accents and different language, I got chased by kids shouting, 'Yankee go home,' or, 'Nazi go home,' because my accent was a Germanic-American hybrid. I got beaten up and I got picked on. But the way I could deal with that, which is how most incoming immigrant or refugee communities are not able to do, was I buried myself. I went truant for a while. But I emerged speaking the English of the streets around where I lived. From then on, I didn't look any different from any of those kids. So I could blend. But deep down, I knew that I had been rejected. I have never felt English, and I still don't. I love London, because I identify with the kind of multiculturalism. Just the collision and blending and symphonies of all the different cultures that make up what to me is the vibrancy of life in the world. When I have a city that has that vibrancy of difference and life and change, then I feel at home.
- Suterwalla: But in that case, there wasn't a sort of belongingness?
- Johnson: So even after I managed to get to where I blended – well, my mum still didn't blend. So we wore hand-me-down clothes. We got our clothes from this thing called the Good Will Store.
- Suterwalla: Would you have identified with a class?
- Johnson: No. I didn't have any class politics at all either. We were poor but my parents were quite middle class.
- Suterwalla: Were your parents sort of professionals?

Johnson: Yes. They came from middle-class backgrounds. But we were very poor. We were poorer than most people around us.

Suterwalla: Right.

Johnson: But my parents definitely had quite a lot – they valued education quite highly and wanted us to do well at school. In fact the worst that I could do when it was the period of time when I very persistently played truant...

Suterwalla: Well, I read in the archives that you were due to do your masters when you went to the camp.

Johnson: No. I was due to do my PhD.

Suterwalla: Oh, I see.

Johnson: So I should probably jump now. So pacifism was in my life. The thing that I chose when I reached the age of choice, so sort of 16, 17, was feminism. This was the early '70s. So the very beginning of the Women's Movement. That just went straight to the core of my being and who I wanted to be.

Suterwalla: How did you tap into it? How did it come into your life? Was your mum talking about it?

Johnson: Oh, no, no, no, no. I mean, you know, because – but I did have sisters. Although none of them were really feminist, we were all quite strong. We had to make our way. Because there was no money in the family and there was not going to be any inheritance. We had to. We got sent to quite a rough school, because we didn't know any better. So we had to make our own way. But I think it really – I can remember seeing the women throwing bags of flour at the Miss World competition and thinking, somewhere along the line –

Suterwalla: On TV?

Johnson: Yes. It was on TV. It was just a clip on the news. The commentator actually made these really sarcastic remarks about the women, who were portrayed as very shrill in this. But I can just remember thinking I knew why they did it. I knew why they'd – even though the news was not explaining it. I knew why they did it. I mean, I went to a girls' school. But I wanted to study

physics. I actually – you know, we had to study typing. Because it was really expected that we were going to be secretaries. If we were really, really ambitious, we might become a teacher. So, I didn't really have that consciousness while I was –

Suterwalla: What about reading things? Like feminist texts? The new Kate Millett or, I mean, were you reading those books?

Johnson: I didn't do that until I was 18. The big change that happened to me was, when I was 17 I got a scholarship to go and live in Alaska for about nine months as part of an exchange programme. I only applied –

Suterwalla: That must have been the most alien thing.

Johnson: Well, it was amazing. I applied for the scholarship to go to the United States, because I actually wanted to go and see my brothers and sisters who were left there.

Suterwalla: Oh, wow, yes.

Johnson: But probably in their wisdom, the people who granted the scholarship probably realised that as soon as I got the United States, I was probably going to play truant and go and spend the time with my brothers. So they sent me to Alaska, which is one part that – you know, there was no way I could get out of it.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: But then I had to be on my own two feet. I became the eldest child of six. Or rather, I became a kind of almost an au pair to a family with six children younger than I. I needed to work with that, because the mother broke her leg skiing about a week before I arrived. I went to high school and to college while I was there and did some courses in things like Inuit culture, the culture of the native Americans from the Alaskan area. Actually a little bit of their language too. Russian culture and language, because Alaska had a big... anyway, then, you know, some other things, like new American literature. It was a couple of the teachers who did those subjects that introduced me to – somebody introduced me to – now, was that then or was that...? Well, I know I got introduced to Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. Feminism. I don't remember anything of that kind coming in. But I did used

to – I mean, I love literature and science and fiction. But I actually wanted to be a scientist. So I didn't concentrate on literature. But then while I was in Alaska – and this was also the time of Watergate. It was also the time when the Republicans were trying to push through the pipeline through Alaska.

Suterwalla: So what year would this be?

Johnson: It was 1973. That was all waking up here really. Because I woke... I can remember, and I probably still have somewhere, in one of the classes, you were asked to write something that just – and I wrote an essay called *Herself*. I would have been eighteen. It was basically an essay about a woman having right to herself, to be herself, a right to choose how she lives her life, a right – you know, all of those things were sort of my own little private version of *A Room of One's Own*. Except that I hadn't even read Virginia Woolf at that point. So by the time I came back from Alaska and went to university, I had become politically attuned. Actually, in many ways, I didn't really want to study physics anymore. I wanted to study politics. I did end up change my degree.

Suterwalla: So this was around '74?

Johnson: '74. I went to Bristol and went – you know you have a Freshers' Week, I just walked straight up to the table that had 'Women's Liberation' on it. I said, 'Sign me up for that!' Then had my mind kind of opened up to all kinds of other things at that time. Made some wonderful friends, almost all of whom were feminist. They were very much connected with the theatre and the arts. Whereas I still was this kind of quite clumsy, clunky kind of nerdy scientist.

Suterwalla: What were you talking about as feminist?

Johnson: Oh, at that time, well, there were two kinds of things. One was talking about all the kind of the social history kind of things about, you know, women's right to their bodies, women's right for equal pay, going on the demonstrations for the National Abortion Campaign. All sorts of things like that. Then a little group of us – because I transferred and I started studying philosophy. A little group of us actually started, formed, a feminist philosophy group and started actually analysing stuff about how language is

used to confine women's thinking and confine the way that we can talk about certain issues and all of this sort of thing.

Suterwalla: Were you exposed to the French feminist theorists?

Johnson: I read all of Beauvoir in that time.

Suterwalla: How about Irigaray and Kristeva and that sort of stuff?

Johnson: No, I didn't at that time. I definitely, I read a lot of the socialist feminist stuff. So I read Sheila Rowbotham. I read, you know, Germaine Greer of course. *The Female Eunuch*. I did read Kate Millett at that time.

Suterwalla: Right.

Johnson: I read everything that Simone De Beauvoir wrote. Then there was some other quite interesting stuff. Ann Oakley wrote something about housework.

Suterwalla: Oh, yes. *Housewife*. Yes.

Johnson: Yes. We had various – other, somebody or other wrote – we had several of these. I mean, Sheila Rowbotham and Ann Oakley, somebody, whose other name I've forgotten, we had them come and talk to our group. I mean, usually we would open those meetings up to all, so that quite a lot of people sort of involved in other issues. Because it was a time of political awakening for quite a lot of us actually.

Suterwalla: Yes can you talk about that and describe what was happening in terms of what you call 'awakening'?

Johnson: Because I'd also never been exposed to socialist politics. I mean I felt very profoundly that inequality was wrong but I didn't have any political language for things like that. Of course the year I was at university was the year after the whole Chilean coup. That had been profoundly shocking for me, how that democratically elected government had been overturned so ruthlessly and bloodily. How that had been done with American collusion. You probably aren't particularly aware of it. I played music at the time and I did lot of street theatre with my music and these other...

Suterwalla: I've read that the theatre was a massive sort of locating point for feminism, because of the whole – you know, its subversion of performance and the appropriation of different – of all those metaphors that had been taboo and restricted in the past.

Johnson: Yes and things like the street theatre were a way, and the kind of music. I wrote a lot of feminist songs at the time.

Suterwalla: I've heard you singing the songs on the Your Greenham site.

Johnson: Oh, the Greenham thing. Yes.

Suterwalla: Is that your voice?

Johnson: That's my voice. Yes. But that's not – those aren't – most of those I didn't – I mean, one or two of those I might have written. But I wrote a whole series of feminist ones. Because in the '70s, I really was not interested in the pacifist thing. In fact, I would not have called myself a pacifist at that point.

Suterwalla: Right.

Johnson: Partly because of the Chilean coup. I went through a period – and I was also having a kind of political awakening. I was reading everything from Marx and Chomsky and this sort of thing. I had period for believing that if you really wanted liberation, then – the ruling class would not let you do it, as they hadn't let Chile do it. They wouldn't let you do it through the ballot box. That they would require bullets. They'd use bullets against you and they'd require – and so, I developed a kind of view of violence as a last resort. It was never something that I wanted to glorify. But at that time, I felt that it probably had a role to play in protecting democracy and so on. I had a lot of arguments with my father about this, because my father particularly was very, very deeply – well, my parents were both deeply pacifist. We kind of grew up thinking of my father as being the one that you had the intellectual discussions with. Which after my father died in '79 I got to know my mother so much better. I just realised this was just a really interesting woman who had herself, before all this community – she gave up a lot to go into the community. She'd been early feminist. She'd been involved in things like peace and reconciliation.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Johnson: This woman that ended up having to have eight children actually had wanted something different. She and her twin sister were the first from their entire families ever to get to college. They went to teacher training college. They were twins and they went to the same college. So she'd done her own thinking in all of this. We'd never hear that. We'd never listened to her. Because our father was always the intellectual. In the community, it was actually codified. Because at the sort of – well, it was called the Society of Brothers was one of the other – that was an Americanised version of the name of the community. They would have brotherhood meetings which women could sit in on. But if women wanted to speak, it was generally accepted and normal and actually they would not be listened to if they didn't, but they would preface their remarks by saying, 'I am but a woman.'

Suterwalla: What a contrast to Greenham, I imagine!

Johnson: Then they would be able to say what they had to say. So no wonder. These were really quite strong, feisty women. But everything got channelled into cooking and children and cleaning and laundry and stuff. There wasn't a role for women outside. My mother was a teacher. So she did the kindergarten on up. But most of the women there, it was all those domestic roles. So I was having those arguments with my father. My mother was probably in the room. But I don't – you know, I remember the arguments as being with my father. I came to nonviolence after I finished university. I went travelling and I went to Africa and I went across to Asia. I started to see the world more through my own eyes than through the eyes of some writer in a book. I talked to a lot of people because I did a lot of hitchhiking and taking of buses and trains and the kind of modes of transport that ordinary people do. Therefore people get talking to each other. That's how I fetched up eventually in Japan. Then I ended staying there for two years. Again, in Japan, I wasn't involved in any of the peace stuff. I mean, I went to Hiroshima once. But I was involved with a group of women, a group of feminists and lesbians, who were setting up things like a rape crisis centre in Tokyo, who were challenging – this was 1979 to 1981.

So we're talking about a period of time when they were really – Japan was still very, very, deeply patriarchal. Very different spheres of work for men and women. Spheres of influence. Well, I mean, Japan was in transition. It had emerged out of all the complications over the defeat at the end of the Second World War and then the occupation. It emerged beyond that and it

actually was at its height economically. It was very self-confident in many ways. The women were also quite self-confident in all kinds of ways. But the majority of women had their spheres of living and working but were relatively comfortable in those. But my group of friends were a group that were not comfortable in those. Either because of their sexuality, which meant that they couldn't marry, or chose not to marry, because actually there were quite a lot of lesbians who did marry and then would carry on what were known as 'afternoon affairs'. They wanted careers. They wanted careers that would give them also an income that they could live on. Again, the way the career structure worked in Japan, you got more and more money through seniority. But there was the expectation that women would leave at about the age of 25 and then return in a part-time capacity at about the age of 35 or 45, when children were at school.

[Interview diverts to Johnson's experiences in Japan, which the interviewee describes in some detail. The transcript from this part of the interview is not included here].

Johnson (cont.):

So it was out of that that I decided I wanted to do a PhD in women's political participation in Japan. I got accepted to SOAS, first of all to do a master's degree. That was in international history of the Far East. I can remember that I did an essay looking at things like prostitution tourism, which was these gangs of Japanese business men that would go to South Korea or to Philippines or to one of these sort of pacific countries, viewed by the Japanese still, in some ways, as a kind of satellite, and basically engage in a whole weekend of debauchery. What that said about economic relations, power relations, you know, both between nations and of course between genders and then the effect that that had on the women that knew that that was what was happening and that's what this business trip was. But there was nothing they could do about it. Some women would actually put condoms in their husband's luggage, just in the hope the husband wouldn't come back with a disease. But that was the most that they could do to say, you know – they couldn't say, 'I don't want you to do this,' because it couldn't be talked about.

[Interview diverts to Johnson describing her work setting up links with Filipino and South Korean women. The transcript from this part of the interview is not included here].

Johnson (cont.): So, I did a master's degree at SOAS, starting in September 1981. So it was during that year when I was doing my master's degree that I began to go down to Greenham.

Suterwalla: And the camp had just started.

Johnson: The camp had just started. I was actually on the Trans-Siberian train when that –

Suterwalla: How did you hear about it?

Johnson: I think – I kind of heard about it sort of – well, I went to a CND demonstration. Because one of the things that shocked me – the issue of nuclear weapons really didn't impinge on me at all in most of my life. I'm being really truthful. It just didn't. I can remember sort of arriving at London and thinking it was really grimy and really dingy and really nasty. Then I was meeting up with my old friends, and everyone was talking about nuclear weapons and CND and all of this, which really surprised me. Because they'd never been interested or involved in that stuff before. So I did go on a CND demonstration. I can remember that somebody from Greenham Common came and spoke. But Greenham really only attracted my attention when it went women only. Which was the March of 1982. The week after that decision, three of us decided we should go down and give them some support, because we knew that it was probably – there was a lot of pros and cons.

Suterwalla: So did you go for the feminist politics, the fact that it was women only, or did you go for peace protest? For the protest against the missiles?

Johnson: Well, when I first went down there, it was actually for curiosity and a bit of feminism, because this was a group of women who'd actually chosen to be a women's peace camp and I thought that was really interesting.

Suterwalla: Do you remember what you were hearing about it before you went down?

Johnson: I think that was one of the first things – there was a couple of pieces in *Spare Rib* about it. There was something in *City Limits* that was actually looking at this sort of quote-unquote 'controversial decision that the camp had made to go women only.' So I went down a couple of times just to visit. Then in the summer of 1982, I had finished all my exams, but I was writing

my thesis. My thesis was on US-Soviet rivalry over the reconstruction of Japan from 1945 to 1951. So my thesis included looking at what was going on at the time that the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So in this time, I was very much more conscious of peace stuff. So that was very much more in my – but there was a women’s festival at the end of July, or possibly the beginning of August in 1982. I think it was down at Glastonbury in fact. I’d never heard of the Glastonbury festival at that point. But this was a women’s festival and there were Greenham women there. I can remember being absolutely blown away on the evening of one of the – I think it was about two or three days. But we were walking back from some kind of a meeting. As I walked up through the thing, there were two different campfires with women round them. Two different sides that we walked between. I suddenly realised that each of them separately were singing a song that I had written.

Suterwalla: Really?

Johnson: ‘Bent Ladies’. They didn’t know that I had. They didn’t know me. I mean, I hadn’t been in the Women’s Movement since I kind of started my travelling in sort of '77, '78-ish. But this song from Bristol days called ‘Bent Ladies’ which somebody had asked for the words and the music for to put into a song book had ended up getting picked up and was being sung by lots of different women.

Suterwalla: That must have been a remarkable moment.

Johnson: I can remember sort of saying to my friend, ‘That’s my song.’ Because she knew my song, because I used to sing that song sometimes in Japan. But I never dreamed that women would know that song who had never ever heard me sing it and didn’t know me. So that was quite weird. Then there were these – there were Greenham women, you see, at that festival. They said please come to Greenham for a little while because they’d had one eviction. I think some of them had even had to go to prison for like a week or something for trying to resist that eviction. They were saying, ‘We’re exhausted. There’s not enough of us. So come.’ Then there was, just to make that point even stronger, there was a little advert I think in *Time Out* or *City Limits* saying the same thing, ‘Women, your sisters need you.’ So I thought, ‘Okay. That’s what I’m going to do for a week.’ So I put my stuff on my motorbike and I rode down to Greenham. I actually arrived on August 9<sup>th</sup>, Nagasaki day. I really was just going to spend a week there.

Suterwalla: So you arrive and you go to Yellow Gate?

Johnson: Yellow Gate was all the gate there was. There were no other gates. There was a travellers' community –

Suterwalla: So this was '82.

Johnson: This was '82. There was a travellers' community that was sort of in the woods near Greenham. They had men as well and the women used to escape being beaten. When the men would get violent, the women would come to us. But the gate, Greenham Common women's peace camp was at the main gate, as it was considered then.

Suterwalla: Can you describe your first – what it looked like and what the women looked like? Particularly in terms of their dress?

Johnson: There were several caravans. Most of the women were living in caravans at that time.

Suterwalla: So they were allowed at that point?

Johnson: Yes. They were painted bright colours and they had peace symbols and women's symbols on them and that. The women were dressed in jeans, big boots of course, because it was kind of muddy. Big jumpers. Often rainbow-wool jumpers. There were only 15 women by the way. There were only about 15 women there at that time.

Suterwalla: Was the rainbow thing more of a hippie thing, did you feel the hippie vibe there in '82 when you arrived?

Johnson: Yes, I think so.

Suterwalla: Did it feel like a hippie countercultural camp, or something different?

Johnson: I mean, that's always been the interesting thing. I think some women at Greenham were kind of, you know, came sort of out of the hippie tradition. Some came out of a quite strong political tradition, either socialist or feminist or both. I'd probably characterise myself as that. Some were coming out of a kind of more spiritualist sort of magic-y tradition. Which

also, in some ways may be connected a little bit with the hippie thing. Then some women – but I would say that this was probably later – ended up almost escaping at Greenham. Escaping an intolerable situation in families or with violence or something like that. Almost nobody really came purely for the peace issue. I mean, women came to visit Greenham purely because of that. But women who lived there it was a more complicated mixture. The first women were Women for Life on Earth. Yes.

Suterwalla: Life on earth and they were mothers and they were campaigning for the future of their children. Is that right? That's what I've read.

Johnson: Very much so. Yes. Absolutely.

Suterwalla: Then it seems that over time it became more rooted in radical feminism. Is that right? Is that what you found, because this is just what I've been reading so...

Johnson: Yes.

Suterwalla: Initially when I look at the images in the archives, women are wearing quite hippie type of clothing. There's lots of stuff about how they come from heterosexual backgrounds, newspaper articles about women leaving their husbands. Some of the women that I've interviewed describe the women as, 'Oh, they just looked like middle-class women who had gone out camping'.

Johnson: Yes. There were lots of women like that, because there were lots of different types of women.

Suterwalla: Then there are images of women in boiler suits and Doc Martens and shaved heads and pink patches and lots of women symbols where there's an identification with lesbian politics and identification with more radical strands of feminism. Was that what it was like? Does that sound right?

Johnson: Yes. There was all of that too.

Suterwalla: From what I understand the camp seems to shift its values as it evolves, did you find that was the case in your experience?

Johnson: I think that's absolutely right. That's very perceptive. First of all I have to say that there is no definitive history of Greenham. There is only each

woman's own experience and recollections. Each woman that came to Greenham came with a set of experiences, good or bad or whatever they were for her life. She brought those into Greenham. She shared them with Greenham, or confronted Greenham with them, and at the same time, she changed Greenham through who she was coming into Greenham and she herself was changed by Greenham because of all the other influences. So the first thing to say, anything that I say about Greenham is only my own experience and perceptions. We were so many different – but that to me was one of the most interesting things. But I was there for five years. Because within three days of having gone to Greenham with my motorbike in August, I realised that I had to stay. I didn't know how long. I think I was just thinking about at least staying through this eviction that they were – but I knew that I had found something.

For me it was actually the fusion of the feminism and the questioning around that and the pacifism, which was actually nonviolence, which actually allowed for my questioning of pacifism, which I hadn't been able to have previously because, you know, in my family tradition, you pacifist or you weren't. Then my father had died abruptly in 1979. So I'd never been able to talk to him following that as my journey changed, as my life changed. But I'd gone down to Greenham and actually, it sounds bizarre to say this, but I actually arrived in the middle of a blazing row between two really quite strong, quite iconic figures of the camp at that time. The row was around the use of drugs at the camp. The row brought in all these issues around responsibility, accountability, freedom, anarchism, tactics, strategy, ideology, objectives, rights, responsibilities. All of these things. Nonviolence, and what nonviolence is. Nonviolence being not just about refraining from hitting somebody but about the way you treat your own body and other people in the most profound senses. The whole drugs issue kind of was almost a metaphor. It was actually a power struggle, to be honest, between these two women. But the argument also brought in all these other issues and was a kind of metaphor. Of course, all of us were partially involved. Although I was just sitting there thinking, 'God. This is crazy'.

But at the same time, it felt so alive. So much more real than any of the intellectual seminars I'd been to at SOAS and a little bit more like the kind of discussions I'd been having with my Japanese friends, which were also quite in depth. But because I wasn't Japanese myself, I didn't always completely understand some of it. But it had that profundity of challenge.

Then I didn't leave until early August of 1987 when we were about to get the treaty. During that time, I saw very distinct almost generation – I mean, one of the things, of course, you alluded to it earlier, fifteen of us organised 'Embrace the Base'. It was very clear in our minds. It was 'Embrace the Base' on Sunday, 'Close the Base' on Monday. So we really wanted women to integrate the idea of protest and demonstration with the idea of active nonviolence. So to us it was always that. But CND of course picked up principally on the 'Embrace the Base' part of that. Although in fact they thought we were mad. They wanted us to have the demonstration in London. They either wanted us not to have a women-only demonstration or to have it in London. Whereas we were insisting on having it –

Suterwalla: It wasn't women only in the end was it?

Johnson: It was 90% women only. We allowed one gate, Orange Gate, to have a mixed identity. But the actual encirclement, at the moment that we wanted to encircle, which I think was something like two o'clock, that was to be women. The jobs for the men at the Orange Gate were basically – I mean, I remember Bruce Kent came up and he was very proud of himself for making lots and lots of Marmite sandwiches. It was running the crèche.

Suterwalla: Oh so there was a crèche too. And men making the sandwiches, that must have been successful!

Johnson: But from that moment, Orange Gate became identified more as a kind of mixed and a kind of family gate. Also because it was a little bit off the road. So you could more safely have kids. So there was practical reasons for that too. There was quite a wide flat space. So you could put up big tents for the demonstration and things like that. But we did get evicted in September which made me think about leaving. Then made me realise that even more than before, I had to stay. I was really coming down – I was spending like five days a week at Greenham and then riding my motorbike back to London to do a day of work at SOAS and have a day with my mother, who was quite frail and was by that time living in London. Then five days at Greenham and two days back. I was just going back and forth on my motorbike but moving more and more into being at Greenham really. Did of course get accepted for this PhD, which was really a bloody great nuisance, because by the time I came out of prison for the second time, which was in sort of March the following year, the university kind of said, 'Okay. You have to make a choice.' They were very nice about it, actually. I have to say,

I don't fault them. They didn't treat me badly over this. They were quite supportive. But they basically said, 'You have a grant. You're doing a PhD and you're not doing a PhD.' I finished my master's thesis on a typewriter at Greenham.

Suterwalla: Really. That's great, and inspiring for me!

Johnson: Because I'd took part in the action on the sentry box and was expecting to go – our court case was due on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September and my master's thesis was due on the 30<sup>th</sup>. I thought that if I didn't get it in before the 20<sup>th</sup> then I might miss the deadline. So I just worked – I basically handed in a first draft. Because it was the days before computers. So I just had a tiny little portable typewriter and I just wrote the thing on it.

Suterwalla: That's great. So you were very productive there.

Johnson: I don't think it was very good. It wasn't very good. I don't think it was a very good thesis. It had some good things in it.

Suterwalla: Can I take you back a little bit...

Johnson: So the generation thing and clothes. Yes, yes.

Suterwalla: The footage of you when you were at Greenham shows you with long blonde hair with some ribbons in your hair, a 'pretty' summer dress. Was that yours? Was that what you looked like when you lived there? Were those ribbons yours?

Johnson: Yes, I have them here actually. Because I actually brought some of the ribbons to put with my hat, you see. Because I still do it.

Suterwalla: Is that a direct reference to the suffragettes?

Johnson: The suffragettes. Direct. Absolutely direct and intentional. But you see, the images of me in the pictures, it's true. I had very long blonde hair...

Suterwalla: And a floral dress on?

Johnson: I know. I think it was – I only wore that dress possibly one day in the whole time. I was normally in – because I rode a motorbike. So I was normally in

boots and jeans or cords and a big jacket too. But I did have long hair. I had that until the middle of '83 I think. But the dress, I think, it just was a very hot summer's day. I was just walking around. I wasn't intending to do an action. I was just walking around between two of the gates because I'd possibly just gone for a swim, in fact, I think is what had happened. I'd just gone for – because there was a little kind of clay pit. I'd just gone for a swim and was walking around and saw them putting these extra rolls of barbed wire up. Just, I had to do something about that. I don't think I was even aware. There was a French woman there and a Japanese woman and I don't believe that I was even aware that there was a photographer. I don't remember when it was that she turned up.

Suterwalla: Had you started to dress much more in line with feminist sort of expectations of what feminists should wear?

Johnson: No, no, no. I always dress to please myself.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: Because I'd grown up dressed in second-hand clothes and you either hated it or you adapted to it. So Bristol, I mean, I wore layers long before anybody ever wore layers. I was wearing like two or three – I liked long skirts quite a lot of the time. But obviously not with the motorbike. I very, very seldom ever wore – I mean, that's what was bizarre about that particular photograph. I did often have my hair like that. So that was definitely right. I can remember when I saw that picture that the *Guardian* used I was astonished.<sup>6</sup> I do remember I had that dress. It was a tiny little light sundress that I basically threw on over a swimsuit. Or if I wanted to go swimming naked. Because you could more easily – it would dry very quickly. But that was not my look. Anyone who – you'll see – if there are pictures, and I'm sure there are, of me during 'Embrace the Base' and 'Close the Base', I just looked like anybody else there. We wore boots. We wore tight jeans. We wore big jumpers. I went through a phase of having a cape. Somebody donated a woven cape that really kept the rain out very, very well. I wore that a lot. That with the long hair gave me quite a flowing look. At some point, somebody donated a tweed jacket and I wore that for a while, because that was quite warm. We never wore the kind of anorak-y thing. I never did that. Nor did anybody else. A few women would come down looking like

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson is referring to the image of her on the homepage of the Your Greenham website <http://www.yourgreenham.co.uk> [accessed 19 January 2013].

Marks and Spencer's with their anorak-y look. But I have to say, I didn't do that and wasn't particularly interested in the – because I had you know, I had a motorbike. So I didn't dress girly.

Suterwalla: Was the way that you looked driven purely and only by practicality? Or was there a politics behind it?

Johnson: There was a politics behind it. Definitely.

Suterwalla: Could you talk about that?

Johnson: Well, part of the politics was – I actually think the politics around the look came after 'Embrace the Base'. I think again, you perceptively noticed this, that all the press coverage of 'Embrace the Base' was of the nice mothers and grandmothers who'd flocked to Greenham. 35, 000. They'd all done this nice peaceful demonstration. All these images of women against the fence and all this smiling and all these picnics and all of this. Then all the images from 'Close the Base' and, indeed, the news coverage was of burly lesbians. It was one day later. Now, actually the cross section of women taking part in 'Close the Base' was not so different from the cross section – a little bit different in that it was slightly younger. But it still had quite a number of older women. A lot of the women who'd come down from 'Embrace the Base' came down more with the CND sort of – they came down with CND coaches. Whereas the women who stayed for 'Close the Base', their connection with Greenham –

Suterwalla: Which is the next day.

Johnson: Which is the next day. The very next day. So they just stayed over and they brought their tents. The women who stayed for Close the Base were very much more associated, I think, with the feminist peace movement that was being generated – and indeed with the feminist movement as well. But the other things was, the differences between them. Because 'Close the Base', we were going to be blockading gates where the military were going to be trying to drive military vehicles in. You're not going to wear nice dresses to do that. You're going to wear your strongest clothing. Your best boots, because you're going to be dragged away and you're going to get hurt if you've not got good strong clothes, good strong protection. And it was bloody freezing. You know, it was sleet. You can't see snow on the ground, but I can tell you, there was sleet. It was December 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> in 1982. So

inevitably, those of us who were staying for that, and, as I say, the camp at that time – there were only fifteen or twenty of us. I'd just done my first prison sentence and come out two weeks before 'Embrace the Base' for that. So all the women that stayed for 'Close the Base' came down for 'Embrace the Base', apart from twenty of us. So it was the same women. But the media chose to portray us so completely differently.

Suterwalla: That's interesting, especially the difference between what you remember and the media representation of it...

Johnson: Then a section, over a hundred of those women, stayed and stayed and stayed. So by Christmas, there was this very different culture developing around the fire. That was where you got this much more overtly lesbian-feminist identified, anarchist identified...

Suterwalla: Is that just because more women from those politics were coming and staying?

Johnson: I think so.

Suterwalla: Or was it something else?

Johnson: No, there was nothing intrinsic.

Suterwalla: There wasn't a consciousness raising, a drive towards much more sort of an anarchist value system?

Johnson: No, I don't think so. Because I think we all came to Greenham with these very different politics. Greenham had to – in Greenham, we actually had to confront each other's politics, and our own, and change and engage. That was a constant process, if you like, of kind of engagement and change and political transformation for all of us. So there was nothing intrinsic. In fact one of the things that proved there was nothing intrinsic, because once the gates started to settle around the base, which they did during 1983, and the reason why they did it, and this actually, interestingly, goes back right to my childhood. The Hutterite communities discovered that they couldn't maintain a healthy, integrated, nonviolent community with more than about two hundred people. When you get to about two hundred people, a group of that Hutterites would go off to found a new one. They would keep very close connections but they'd go off. That would include a couple of families

and some children and some single people and a couple of old people. So you'd form the nucleus of a new community.

Well, with Greenham, it was around one hundred. So Yellow Gate actually that winter of 1982 became almost unbearable because it rained every day for a start. So it became an absolute mud bath. There were a lot of different women there. Many of whom weren't doing very much to contribute. They were sitting around a fire and talking and expecting everything to be done for them. Plus there was these constant kind of adjustments politically. There was a significant group of women that had come to stay at that point, who'd come down for 'Embrace the Base' and 'Close the Base' and had suddenly decided this was a lot of fun and was very exciting. They did have much more explicit feminist analysis and anarchist analysis. When I first went to Greenham in August of '82, I'd say I probably had the most strongly feminist analysis, as such, of anyone there. There was still a group of Welsh women who were very involved who were very much more into the kind of mothers and grandmothers, you know, life on earth peace thing. There were a couple of witches who had a feminist consciousness but in the context of feminist spirituality, Mary Daly, the cosmic thing. There were a number of anarchists and there were a couple of quite strongly anti-American socialists. But in terms of actually seeing this as a feminist project, I was probably the most feminist identified at that time. When I wrote the original invitation letter for 'Embrace the Base' that went out and had to kind of juggle some of the spiritual stuff, which at that time I didn't identify with, I couldn't really understand, with some of the clearer political questions and demands that I did identify with. A lot of the women that then came to stay I think had more the kind of feminist-punk anarchist. That's when you started to get the shaven heads and the Mohicans.

Suterwalla:

Was that at Blue Gate?

Johnson:

Well, they first of all set up at Yellow Gate. In fact, it was me and a woman called Sue that first escaped to Blue Gate because we'd begun to find Yellow Gate just a bit too crowded. We set up at Blue Gate. I think it was New Year. No, no, it couldn't have been New Year, because we did the whole of the dancing on the silos for New Year. So it was shortly after that. We set up at Blue Gate for about two or three nights. Set up our camps and things. Then I decided to go back to Yellow Gate and she decided to stay and other women came, because it wouldn't be safe to be on her own. That's how Blue Gate got started. Then we kind of reclaimed Green Gate

from the travellers. Then Green Gate became fully women only in every respect so that it didn't even allow men visitors. Partly that was actually to stop the travellers moving back. It was also partly – it was a wooded area, so women, you know, could – I wasn't really involved with setting up Green Gate. Then Orange Gate got set up initially by weekenders who wanted somewhere. Because they were coming down and they were finding Yellow Gate actually quite alienating. So they were coming down to Orange Gate with families. It had a very family-orientated thing. Also they very often would have a party on Saturday night with music and lots of alcohol and a lot of fun and stuff. But soon after Blue Gate got started, I think this is what you were kind of leading to, but I needed to give you the history a bit more accurately. Soon after Blue Gate got started, and this has always fascinated me, it did become somewhere that really attracted young punky dyke women. Very anarchist, very punky, as I say. Young dykes, baby dykes. Quite working class. So very political but in a very different way from the way that Yellow Gate was political.

Suterwalla: And Green. It seems that Green was –

Johnson: Green, once it developed, and Green had only really developed by about summer.

Suterwalla: Of '83.

Johnson: Of '83. Yes. Because it was really a wonderful holiday camp during the summer months and women flocked there and did nothing but have a good time really. I mean, a lot of them. It became known as the kind of muesli gate. It had again quite a bit of spiritual stuff, holistic stuff. A bit environmental stuff. Was a much more relaxed place. You got the feeling that it attracted quite a few women, like Australian women or American women, attracted a lot of women who sort of wanted a good time and didn't want to have to see the base very often. But at the same time, it was quite a nice place to go for a little break. Because Yellow Gate was getting very, very intense. Because Yellow Gate, had the majority of the problem, you know the press, the media, and all the problems that that generated. The majority of visitors, which was both good and bad. The majority of attacks. Vigilante attacks. My first bender was one of the first that had a vigilante attack, because it was quite exposed.

Because again, I'm running through the history rather fast. But after the

eviction in September of 1982, the authorities dumped a load of rocks. They said they were going to landscape it. We then painted all the rocks like we'd had the caravans painted. So they poured earth on the rocks. Which is actually very nice. Because that meant we could start sort of – the earth allowed us some purchase so we could actually start building benders. But they were evicting us a lot and then it's like they gave up. So then our benders would stay. So I had a bender right on one of the mounds right close to the road, so it was one of the most exposed. I think that that's why – you know, I don't think the vigilantes knew whose bender it was. But it was one of the more exposed at Yellow Gate. What they threw – they threw buckets of blood, shit, entrails from animals, knowing that we were essentially a vegetarian camp. Which of course – and this was summer. It became disgusting, my whole tent and pretty well everything I owned just had to be burned because – and I was away in Japan at that time speaking at meetings. So the women rescued what they could and just – because I'd left my tent there, my bender there, for women to use, you know, who came to visit the camp, because it was nice. It was a lovely bender actually. It was the first one I ever made. The women just had to make the decision to burn what they couldn't rescue. I can remember coming in, riding my motorbike into Greenham, having not known. Again, we didn't have email or any of those sorts of things. So I didn't know about this. So I rode into Greenham as soon as I got back from Japan and it was like, 'Where's my bender? Where's my home? Where's my home? What's happened?' I was feeling really, really insecure about this.

Suterwalla: Of course. I get a sense that benders were really important, or became very important, not just as homes, if you like, but as sort of, how should I put it, as extensions of yourselves.

Johnson: Absolutely. That's why I was so concerned about mine. Then women had to explain and I moved to the other side and built a new bender virtually the day after I arrived. Somebody let me share her bender for the first night and then I built a new bender.

Suterwalla: Because one of the things that I've been thinking is that I'm looking at the way that the clothes and the benders might have created a completely different notion of everyday life and of time, and of kind of resisting time in the conventions of everyday, if you follow me. One of the things I've been thinking about is the concept of time. From my reading, when I read more theoretical stuff, including the cultural theories of the everyday, there's been

the argument that women can live in a kind of domestic time and men live another time, you know that's connected with ideas of universal time or progress. So this is something I've been thinking about. And I was thinking about this in relation to the camp. Because I was thinking was it like you were living in an alternative time because you were being evicted? It can't have been like normal everyday life at home? You were getting woken up at night. You were waking up to the noise of traffic and people going to work? Is that what it was like? Then it's not like you woke up and went and got dressed, because you had to wait for the water to boil. Whatever was happening, it was just – it seems like there was –

Johnson: Most of us washed in cold water. It was much easier.

Suterwalla: Right.

Johnson: Yes.

Suterwalla: But showers or even changing clothes became a completely different system. This has been interesting me.

Johnson: Let me go into that then. Because you see one of the reasons why when you first contacted me I was thinking, 'Why does she want to talk to me?' Because I certainly wasn't somebody that dressed for any style or fashion.

Suterwalla: No.

Johnson: Because I was a little bit older than quite a few of the women there and I rode a motorbike. So my dress was largely dictated by the practicality of it. But boots were comfortable and so on. But I did notice quite early on that there was a group of quite stylish women and they started taking to wearing long johns. Before leggings. Long johns and these big jumpers. And the long johns with the jumpers created a very different style or image from jeans. I wore jeans with jumpers... Somehow they wore long johns and jumpers. Then boots that were half undone quite often. Then suddenly Katharine Hamnett suddenly made a whole – there was her and who was this...? Now which was the fashion designer that did the T-shirt that got the slogan wrong? Vivienne Westwood. So Katharine Hamnett and Vivienne Westwood suddenly were showing catwalk displays of women with long johns or leggings and big rainbow jumpers.

It was like – Greenham was there first actually. The Greenham women – I don't take any credit for it because that wasn't my – but I think that that was a little bit associated with this idea that you had to be at any moment – you kind of had to be ready, whether you were in bed or out of bed. You sort of had to be ready for almost anything. You know, and you sometimes had to catnap. Plus you had to keep dry which meant that things like leggings were much more practical to get dry quickly if they got wet than jeans.

Suterwalla: Because people said they'd stopped wearing jeans and started to wear army surplus trousers, because they dried.

Johnson: They dried quickly. Jeans would get wet and then they would cling and they'd be really heavy. Whereas something like long johns or leggings, they'd get wet for a while but your body heat would dry them fairly quickly.

Suterwalla: Yes and people said layers. Because coats would get really cold and they were too difficult to dry.

Johnson: Yes. That was the other thing.

Suterwalla: I guess you had to just layer and layer to keep warm.

Johnson: Part of the revolution was we were dressing to please ourselves, for comfort and for our conditions. The last thing on any of our minds was dressing for men's gaze. So whether you were busty or you were non busty, big jumpers made us all the same. Whether you were tall or short, you could feel really comfortable in that clothing. We also shared clothing. We also had clothing donated. A lot of us didn't have much money. We'd either given up—I had to give up my student grant at the point of which I definitely chose that I was leaving studies. Women were on the dole. So there was that. One aspect was transgressive, because although we were in the public eye, we clearly didn't give a toss about how sexy we looked. Except to each other...

Suterwalla: Was there a look then for each other?

Johnson: Yes.

Suterwalla: How did you look sexy for each other in those conditions?

Johnson: I think there was even style even within Greenham. I would say that, for example, I remember one woman being kind of – everybody, well not everybody – some of the women were a bit suspicious of her. There was the rumour that she was probably with the police. She was probably a spy. When you'd say, 'Well, what makes you think that?' Because she was actually a Quaker woman. 'What makes you think that?' 'Oh she wears Marks and Spencer's clothing.' That which was perfectly normal in other lives was considered to sort of be a mark of the establishment. At the very least it said that she lacked style. At the worst, it made people suspicious. The Greenham look was the clothes that could be replaced by – because the other thing was with evictions, you lost stuff.

Suterwalla: Was there then a drive against the capitalist system?

Johnson: Yes.

Suterwalla: Was it that you shouldn't look that you were into mainstream fashion?

Johnson: Well, it was never explicit. I mean, that's why I gave that experience of the attitudes towards this particular woman. Because that was one of the few occasions when you actually heard it be made a bit explicit. There was one occasion against me as well.

[Johnson continues with her story but requests that this part of the interview remains private. For this reason it has not been included in the transcript here].

Johnson (cont.): But I'd been a lesbian before I went Greenham. I was in a relationship at that time at Greenham but very few women knew about it. So I appeared single. But because I was in the relationship, I also wasn't flirting with anyone. This whole thing came up of, you know, 'You don't look like a lesbian. If you're a lesbian, prove it,' kind of thing. It somehow became an accusation against me at one stage, which was really bizarre, because what did a lesbian look like? But obviously it was partly – because my clothing was much the same as anybody else's. Greenham was also – it almost inverted the social structures in the rest of life. Where in the rest of life lesbians were marginalised and often in the closet, often expect to be in the closet, often hiding their sexuality, often discriminated against because of their sexuality. At Greenham, it was like that almost became inverted. That even women that later quite clearly turned out to be heterosexual felt that if

they wanted to join the club, they had to be lesbian, they had to look lesbian, the had to act lesbian. They had to be part of that community. That was another of, I think, the hidden discriminations against this woman who wore Marks and Spencer's clothing was that, you know, she was heterosexual and clearly was not part of the gang.

Suterwalla: So why do you think people turned against your look?

Johnson: It was the long hair and the ribbons.

Suterwalla: Is that why you cut your hair?

Johnson: No, no. I didn't have to. I chose to. In fact, I rebelled against – I might have cut it earlier except that long hair is much easier to manage at Greenham, because I just used to plait it out of the way most of the time. Short hair actually is more inconvenient if you're living in those kinds of conditions. Long hair kept me warm as well. But I've always resisted somebody telling me what I should look like. I've resisted kind of the assumptions that heterosexual society puts on me. But damn it, I'm not going to have my freedom of choice being – I'm not going to be coerced into looking a certain way.

Suterwalla: This is the thing that I found strange. Because when I ask women, 'Was there a Greenham look?' they'll say, 'No. Greenham was anti-hierarchical. It was non-prescriptive. There were all kinds of women there,' which, of course, is what I hear and read, but I still wonder, was there a Greenham look?

Johnson: There was. Not just a Greenham look, but there were gate looks. This is again, once you got to '83 and from '83 onwards, the gates came and went but they basically kept – and different women came and went from the gates. Yet there was essentially – Blue Gate kept a kind of hard-edged, working-class, tough, baby-dyke, punky sort of radicalism there. Green Gate kept much more of the hippieish kind of thing. You could have your long flowing skirts more easily at Green Gate, because you were less likely to suddenly find yourself blockading a military vehicle. Because half the time at Green Gate, they didn't even notice the military vehicles were there. But under the long flowing skirts, you always had boots.

Suterwalla: How did those looks come about? Other than necessity, do you think that was the pressure from other women?

Johnson: No. I don't. I think it was much more subtle than that. I don't think that was about any explicit pressure or tone or anything. I think women were both drawn to gates that they felt a little bit comfortable with. Then they began to dress to feel even more – there was a belongingness. This is something interesting. It would be interesting to see if this gets reflected in what others say. I think this is part of – now if you look back at sort of cultural things, people do sort of quite often dress to belong. I'm not surprised that some Muslim women who have been raised, you know, by parents who dress like anyone else in the street, are going back to wearing not just, you know, the hijab but actually going even further. Going to thing like the niqab.

Suterwalla: It's interesting that you raise that example because that's one of my other case studies, as I mentioned to you in my email.

Johnson: Oh yes, of course, okay. Good.

Suterwalla: So I'm doing punks, Greenham Common and hip-hop and hijab.

Johnson: I think these are connected. Well, I think that are some interesting connections. Because I think they are self-identifying in anger at the way that, through Bush and Blair, because I think this is not British society as such. I think the reaction to 9/11 and the terrorisation of Islam that went on for about eight years of Bush and Blair have been profoundly evil. Profoundly counterproductive. All sorts of things. It left, you know, a generation of young women who wanted to say, 'I'm Muslim and proud.' But who look like anyone else, turned round and say, 'Then I'm going to be in your face with it.'

Suterwalla: I haven't started work on that chapter yes but that a really key issue that I'm hoping to explore.

Johnson: I think Greenham was in your face with who we were. We got so sick of being demonised ourselves that we – I mean, as I say, the irony at Greenham was that once you were seen to be – when I was first coming out, things were hard in the 1970s. Even within the Women's Movement, there were all these conflicts around lesbians and all these fears that somehow lesbians would give women's liberation a bad name. This all came up about

Greenham as well, about the lesbians at Greenham would give the peace movement a bad name. In the 70s I was very private. I wasn't quite certain of my sexuality. I was trying to work it out. I was quite scared of becoming rejected. Plus I'm generally quite femme-y anyway. That's just me naturally. So that's what I went with but I've never worn make up. I've never had talons for nails. The only sort of significant visible element that went along with my being quite femme-y has been long hair. I've had that on and off through growing up. But Greenham, as I said, it got so inverted that even if you weren't a lesbian at Greenham, if you were identified with Greenham, by and large the assumption was that you were, by society out there. So it actually became a very, very safe place for women to come out. But at the same time, some women, I think – because the Greenham culture took on lesbianism almost as – and I think there you did get the dress and the look and the kind of challenge to society that that represented. But then the downside of that, which was only a few women, but it was there, was of then that becoming the in-crowd.

Suterwalla: Yes. That's the sense that I got.

Johnson: Then that sort of almost making it uncomfortable for women who didn't fit into that.

Suterwalla: Because, of course there were other – I mean, Sarah Hipperson was much older even when she went to the camp. There were some –

Johnson: She's deeply homophobic and I think probably still is.

Suterwalla: Right.

Johnson: She was part of that wages for housework sort of thing that kind of tried to take over the camp. By that time, the treaty was there. So I'm not going to go into that.

Suterwalla: Also, some of the photos I saw of Katrina Howse and she's wearing these kind of almost 1950s skirt – a sort of very traditional, conservative suit. It just doesn't fit with –

Johnson: Katrina?

Suterwalla: Yes. There's some photos in the Women's Library archive.

Johnson: Really? Gosh.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: Okay.

Suterwalla: I mean, there's a mix. There are some photos of her in boiler suits and monkey boots. But then there's this other look as well going on.

Johnson: I don't remember her in a skirted type look at all. Because at that time she was one of the ones who was most likely to discriminate against women who did not identify as a lesbian.

Suterwalla: Right, okay.

Johnson: Of course, as you see with politicians who are homophobic, actually what she clearly was trying to deal with was her own sexuality. Because she's now married with a child and all of this. I think she herself felt that she ought to be lesbian. So she had to somehow demonise any women who weren't so that she didn't have to deal with her own sexuality. It now becomes quite clear she was... So her lesbianism had more of a well spring that was about hatred of men, which she eventually got over. Whereas most of us, lesbianism has been about love of women. A sexual love of women as well as a political engagement and wish to be with women. So we didn't feel the need to demonise women, other women, for their sexual choices. Those of us that had gone through the really tough time of ourselves being scared of being demonised for our sexual choice, the last thing I was going to do was demonise any other woman for her sexual choices. I've worked so hard for us to be free to make those choices. Just like I've worked so hard for us to be free to have control over our fertility. Not to force anyone into either having a child or not having a child. But to free the women up for our own choices. I've always felt that around sexuality too. I think quite a lot of us did feel that way.

Suterwalla: Did you feel these values at the camp became quite sort of oppressive?

Johnson: Well, no. You see, that's why I don't want this point to get exaggerated.

Suterwalla: No.

Johnson: I think there were individual women who were quite oppressive and quite coercive in this. But the camp as a whole, no. I think the camp as a whole was actually a very liberating place to live. That's why, if you were being oppressed or coerced at one gate, you could always go round to another gate where they'd welcome you with open arms. I used to indeed go and have little holidays at Green or Violet or Orange and occasionally even Blue Gate. Near the end of the time at Greenham, we used to go to Blue Gate quite often. Because they were very much more congenial. In fact, it's so ironic, my partner is in fact an old Blue Gate woman. I don't remember her at all from Greenham. Because she was one of the young women. She came and went a certain amount and so on. She remembered me from that time. But I was sort of over there at Yellow Gate and doing lots of political stuff which she wasn't particularly interested. We've only been together now two years. So it's really funny. Because her experiences and my experiences of Greenham are really very, very different.

Suterwalla: What about a sense of utopianism? Can I ask you about this? Did that exist there? Was there a kind of projection into the future, into creating a different society?

Johnson: In a way. I know that for me personally, I believed – you know, people would come and say, 'Oh, it must be quite easy for you doing peace stuff as a women's peace camp.' I'd say, 'Absolutely not. Look, this is not a place of sweetness and light. This is a place of constant challenge and question and all of that.' It could get very, very tough and very difficult emotionally and politically and psychologically and all of that. I used to believe however that if we ourselves could create that community amongst ourselves given how many very, very different kinds of women. We had a lot of women come down who had greater or lesser levels of mental-health problems. In fact police would sometimes pick women up in parks in Reading or Basingstoke and bring them to Greenham. Now, some women thought that that was to destabilise us. I actually took the police on face value on that one. It was for the safety of those women. These were women with mental-health problems who were living rough in parks where they were going to get raped and hurt. The safest place the police could bring them to was Greenham, given that the women hadn't committed any offence and so couldn't be arrested and put in cells anywhere. So they were. They were regularly turning up with women. Now most of those women would only stay for a very short while with us and then they'd move on. Some of them

stayed and lived.

I think I always believed quite deeply that if we could, with all our differences, and all our conflicts, if we could find a way to live in nonviolence with each other, and find a way to create this coherent nonviolent resistance to the military machine of the Americans and the British and the nuclear weapons, while still retaining our humanity, our individualism, our mutual self-help and dependence almost. The anarchism that I went back to was more the anarchism of Kropotkin than the kind of punk anarchism of the others. It was kind of mutual dependence, mutual self-help, being responsible for each other as well as ourselves. I felt that if we could do that, we had a right to have something to say to the world about how the world needed to deal with its conflicts.

Suterwalla: Did you want men to be separate? Did you want it to be an all-women life?

Johnson: I wanted Greenham to be an all-women life.

Suterwalla: Did you want that to extend out?

Johnson: Well, for me personally, I went through a phase of being lesbian separatist that lasted all about a year. But basically, no. I had two beloved brothers. I had a growing number of nephews as well as nieces that I loved very dearly. They used to come to the camp and visit me. I used to love it when they did that. I saw myself as trying to create a future that would be for all those children. I also retained a couple of quite deep friendships with men from my university days. They were deep friendships. I didn't want a world that would exclude them or coerce them or – I didn't want a world with separate concentration camps in them. I didn't want that kind of world. But I did believe that for us to do the job we needed to at Greenham, we did it best as women. I've always wanted in my life a political engagement that was women only. I think it strengthens me to do then an effective political engagement with men against bigger power. That's how I am now. It's incredibly important to me that it is, and my personal, intimate relationships with women. But I have deep friendships with men. I work in the area of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, which is absolutely patriarchal and male dominated and where very often I'm the only woman on a platform. I'm often the only – I'm occasionally the only woman in a room.

Suterwalla: Still?

Johnson: Still. On nuclear weapons issues, yes. It's changing a little bit. But, yes. But it still happens. I'm frequently the only woman on a platform. No, actually but coming back to the clothes, I actually think the clothes – I think there were some elements of identity around clothing. I think that was particularly the case for the younger women. But I also think that was because they also came from a kind of punk tradition where dress and look of clothing had become very, very important. Punk style.

Suterwalla: Do you mean in terms of resistance or opposition, or for punk women presenting new ways of being?

Johnson: It was definitely about transgressing. About turning – about being beautiful for yourself in a way that challenged the parental expectations of beauty. So a woman shaving her head actually was on the one hand – and of course this was a punishment meted out to women at the end of the Second World War. It was considered profoundly unfeminine. Yet these young women that did it, of course, actually were extraordinarily beautiful. In doing it, it brought out their whole features. But they weren't doing it to be beautiful. They were doing it to be punk, I think, as much as anything. Yes, part of that was doing it because long hair was associated with a certain brand of femininity. But then the women who shaved their heads were never the ones that had made me feel uncomfortable.

Suterwalla: Part of the lesbian look was also kind of –

Johnson: Very short hair. Yes. That too. There was that sort of look, which was that burly dyke. But again, we almost, there was almost, an ironic – we almost did that deliberately with an irony after having already been sort of demonised as burly lesbian dykes. 'Well, if they want to know what a burly lesbian dyke really looks like, I'll show 'em.' So there was an element of that. But I actually think what we were doing in some ways was more profound. We were dressing for the conditions we were in. It's just the society had got used to women being expected to dress irrespective of the conditions. So women were expected to kind of be walking along streets with high heels on. Women were expected to be in freezing cold weather with nothing but a thin layer of stocking between them and the weather. We were out in outdoors. We lived outdoors. As you said, we had to be quite flexible of our dress because we –

- Suterwalla: Is it also that transgression happened because women were out of the domestic space. That's where there was also a transgression in terms of spatial transgression?
- Johnson: I suspect that's right for many.
- Suterwalla: The fact that they were living, looking as though they were out of the domestic space, in that they were wearing warm protective utilitarian clothes.
- Johnson: I think that's true. I think that is partly – I think society has to take responsibility for its being offended by that. But I think you're right that part of it as well was that then when we left Greenham, we might take off a couple of the layers, but, by and large, we kept the style.
- Suterwalla: Yes, now I wanted to –
- Johnson: That was interesting because, you know, somebody might wear layers to go on a hike in the Scottish highlands and big boots and all of that. But the minute she'd get home, they'd all come off.
- Suterwalla: So why did women keep dressing like that?
- Johnson: Well, partly we didn't have many clothes. Most of us didn't live – by this time, I had to give up my flat in London because it was associated with SOAS. So I didn't have – I had whatever I could fit into, first of all, my motorbike, and then I had to give that up and get a car. So we didn't have much luggage. We didn't have – I mean, women could go home and they would change into something else. But then I think there was also a bit of pride. There was a little bit of pride when we'd go through London. I can remember coming up to London and going on the tube and I knew that I smelt of wood smoke. I knew that people moved away a bit. I thought, 'Yeah, but I'm living outdoors. Wood smoke is part of my life.' So wearing my clothes in London also did identify me as Greenham woman. So, yes, in that respect, there was a consciousness. But there wasn't a consciousness when I was wearing them at Greenham because they were the most practical clothes for the conditions we were in.
- Suterwalla: Yes. How has Greenham impacted your life?

Johnson: Oh, profoundly. Well, it changed what it did with my life. I've ended up actually working in the peace area rather than the feminist area, which is kind of odd to say that Greenham, which I went to because of feminism, actually made me give up a feminist PhD and ended up getting a PhD in multilateral diplomacy, which is what my PhD is in, and arms control and disarmament and all of those things.

Suterwalla: Yes. When you went to prison while you were at Greenham how did that pan out? That must have affected things for you?

Johnson: I had twelve sentences after conviction and probably about four or five on remand before. But the twelve sentences, the longest I ever did was thirty days.

Suterwalla: Was that in Holloway?

Johnson: Mostly Holloway. Nearly all my sentences were Holloway. I was a bit in Cookham Wood briefly for about three weeks?

Suterwalla: In Kent?

Johnson: In Kent. Actually I was put once with Myra Hindley. Which was kind of – I was safe for them to put Myra Hindley in with because –

Suterwalla: Wow.

Johnson: – because I was nonviolent and Myra Hindley kept being attacked. She heard me singing in the corridor when I was cleaning the floors with this tiny little humiliating – brush. That's a different story.

Suterwalla: That must have been chilling.

Johnson: No, actually it wasn't. It was eye opening. Again, you see, it was eye opening to me that nothing, that there is nothing that is evil through and through, that can simply be thrown away. Because, yes, what she had participated in was evil. People have since written – I've always kept it quiet, because I promised her I'd never go to the press about it. I mean, now that's she's died, maybe there might be one time that I –

Suterwalla: Gitta Sereny I think has written a book or something.

Johnson: Right. But there have been a couple of things that have looked at, have done a feminist analysis, of how Myra Hindley was treated. Given that she was not the person that actually initiated or carried or got the sexual pleasure from the attacks and the murders. That was all Ian Brady. She was as much – not as much – but she was also a – I think people now realise – she herself had been subject to a lot of violence in her childhood and so on. She was certainly his victim. But she allowed – in being his victim, to curry favour with him, she then took part and actually enabled the kidnap and the torture of these children. One of the conversations that I had with her was of her responsibility in that. Because she was still in the mode that she was saying that she was a victim and that people didn't understand that. I listened to that very carefully. I said, 'Yes. I understand what you're saying. I think you were. But even as a victim, even when you are absolutely terrorised, the fact is you still don't lose your faculty for knowing right and wrong.'

Suterwalla: Are those the kind of values that were around the soldiers and the cruise issue and the military? What women were saying about not being inert in the decision making?

Johnson: Yes. Yes. The soldiers – we stood in front of them and actually lay in front of them sometimes, was actually to confront them. 'Are you going to stop or are you going to run me over?' 'If you run me over, at least that's consistent with what you're doing in driving a nuclear weapon. But if you stop, you are essentially saying you're not prepared to kill. So why are you engaging in this exercise to kill millions of people you've never met?' This was part of the nonviolent dialogue, in a sense, that was going on. Again, this is why I refer to nonviolence rather than pacifism, because I think nonviolence actually confers – nonviolence allows for us – we can recognise that anger and fear can be incorporated into nonviolence and channelled. Whereas in pacifism, or at least in the kind of Gandhian notion of pacifism or passive resistance or whatever you call it. People were expected to suppress anger and fear. Now, women are conventionally expected to suppress their anger and never take it out on a man. A passive woman, when men get violent, quite a lot of them actually expect the woman to be passive and they quite enjoy it. It can inflame them, it can stimulate them, to be using a woman as a punch bag, or raping her something. So we were had to change that. We couldn't just do lying down in the road as a passive thing. Because we had women coming to Greenham who had been subjected to appalling violence in their background. For them to be passive in the face of violence was to

take power away from them. It was to bring back all those feelings of helplessness and anxiety and feeling all that. So the nonviolence that we developed at Greenham was a profoundly active, challenging and changing aspect of nonviolence. Our dress was all part of that.

Suterwalla: That's what the press picked up on? I think the press saw that as – they really picked up on that aggression. You know, they thought it was aggression as transgression?

Johnson: It was assertiveness. Not aggression.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: That's what they misread.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: They misread it as if it was aggression. Whereas from our point of view –

Suterwalla: They saw these short-haired, roughly dressed women who looked angry.

Johnson: Yes. It wasn't that we even looked – they'd see us smiling and they'd think – only because we weren't smiling at them. We weren't flirting with them. We weren't, dressed as we were, reaching to them. We weren't looking for their reaction in how we were. We were getting on with ourselves. We were getting on with our life. They could come and film us if they needed to. They could come and talk to us. But we didn't need them. We weren't doing anything for them or for their gaze. We would be perfectly polite. Some women would be quite aggressive. But quite a lot of us, and I would include myself, by and large, I was always very courteous, very polite to the male journalists as well as the police and so on and all of that. But that's all. I was simply being courteous to them. But I wasn't being feminine and flirty and anything like that. That's what they couldn't understand.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: Then that's what they then translated into rejection.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: If they felt rejected, then we must have rejected them. We hadn't rejected them. They felt rejected because we weren't giving them all those signals and energy that they had been used to getting from women all around. Similarly, we weren't rejecting them. We were just not – we just didn't care about them. That was the profoundest rejection actually. We weren't hostile. Well, most of us weren't being hostile or aggressive.

Suterwalla: It wasn't a man's world in that space?

Johnson: It's just we were getting on with the life that we felt. We felt, and I think we were right, that we were doing more than CND could do. What we were doing was changing the politics around anti-nuclearism and peace. Not singlehandedly of course. There were Greens and there were various other people on their own kind of journey. But CND was still trying to do it with traditional politics. So the men were still trying to do it in the traditional trade-union type of way that they'd always done it. Or the religious way that they'd done it. Depending on whether they were trade unionists or religious. So they weren't challenging society in the same way that we were.

Suterwalla: Yes. Oh, I could talk to you for hours and hours. Absolutely fascinating. It's such a rich interview, thank you so much.

Johnson: It's a pleasure. I never consciously, until I'm having this conversation with you, thought about Greenham and all this stuff being also represented in our clothing. Partly because for me clothing was just something that was practical for the weather. Which is why it never crossed my mind that wearing a dress would become peculiar either. But I think we did believe that there was something about confronting a massive military machine, a convoy of nuclear weapons, with little more than who we were as women. But we dressed to be warm. There was an occasion when I actually avoided having very, very serious harm. It was after the bombing of Libya and the Americans initially completely evacuated the base. Then we found out that they'd used cluster bombs in Libya and children had died, women had died. They'd used cluster bombs. Cluster bombs come from a base very near Greenham. I and another woman had already gone there two or three times under cover of darkness and we'd been mapping it, which is why we knew the cluster bombs, we knew exactly where they were. But we'd come out again each time. We'd done that. We'd left lots of messages in paint.

We deliberately approached three American women because we said, 'This is our responsibility. It's our collaborative crime that our governments have made to bomb Libya in this way. So we have to cooperate and collaborate ourselves as nonviolent women. The US and British together to kind of undo this.' So we went into to that place and we went straight to the cluster bombs. We were painting them with lots of red paint symbolising blood and writing 'blood on your hands' and all this sort of thing. We were being a lot noisier than when Lorna and I did it by ourselves. So in the fullness of time, we got noticed and got arrested and one woman would get arrested and she'd sit down. I was the very last. By the time the American came up in the second Jeep to arrest us, he was beside himself with anger, fear. I totally recognise some of the things I hear happened in Iraq. Because the Americans, they're so terrified. I think probably quite a lot of soldiers are. But I think the Americans particularly are very badly trained. They also – anyway, very brutal. So he started whacking at me with his rifle. Now, it was a cold night. I was wearing seven layers. One after the other. So I was protecting my head as best as I could, because that was the most vulnerable thing. He was whacking me over my shoulders, my arms. Then I fell backwards.

Suterwalla: Making contact?

Johnson: Oh, God. Oh, God, yes!

Suterwalla: I mean actually hitting you? Oh, no.

Johnson: Then he'd pushed me – well, then he pushed me backwards and he went 'whack' across – I fell backwards like this, because he was just big. I could hear the women shouting to the other soldiers, 'Stop him! Stop him! We're completely unarmed. You know we are.' I was protecting my head like this. I was up like that and just trying to roll over like that. He pushed me back and he whacked me because my knees came up. He whacked me across the knees. He smashed my patella on one of my knees. I still have problems with that. But when I went in – you know, and I got arrested and they did stop – they took his rifle away. By the way, they sent him home so he was never in court. They sent some other young guy to lie to say that he was –

Suterwalla: Was he punished at all?

Johnson: No. Because they sent him home because they were afraid that I was going to take a case. Indeed at some point I thought I might. But we'd all got arrested. This is a different story. I won't bore you with a lot of it. But the point was, I think I would have probably have had broken shoulders and broken ribs if I had not been wearing seven layers. As it was, I had visible bruising. To make visible bruising through seven layers of clothing. So here's another thing. We weren't stupid. If we were going to be blockading, even in summer, I wouldn't have worn a dress for blockading in summer. I wouldn't have even worn sandals for a heavy blockade. I mean, occasionally I was photographed wearing sandals on a blockade. But that was only because the blockade happened like 'that'. I remember during actions that we would need layers and tough boots because if we were being dragged you wouldn't want to have sandals and a dress on. But if we knew and we were planning, we would dress to be safe. That meant dressing in layers as well.

Suterwalla: Also, dressing to take on the opposition if you like. So, like you say, I mean it's almost like you dressed in order to gain that physical power that you would need in order to certainly confront, although non-violently, but certainly to stand up and confront the adversary.

Johnson: But it was the physical empowerment.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: Because I felt that I had two or three layers of clothing, and a good pair of boots, then I felt that even if they dragged me away, I'd be less likely to be hurt than if I was wearing some flimsy clothes and a pair of sandals and the shoe would fall off. But it was not dressing to impose my power on them. It was dressing to give myself power. I don't know if any of the people you've spoken have talked to you about the conversation that went on just before we did the dancing on the silos.

Suterwalla: No.

Johnson: Well, we had – this was a collective, consensus decision-making process. We just went round and round and round in a circle. During an early part of it, this was the first time that we were actually going to go at dawn. Well, we were initially thinking about doing it at night. Climb over the fences and go to the silos area, which had been built to house to the nuclear weapons.

The nuclear weapons weren't there yet. But other nuclear weapons were on that base. It was a nuclear base already. The thing went round and one woman said that she was –

Suterwalla: When would this have been?

Johnson: Well, we did the action New Year's morning. Six o'clock in the morning. It's that iconic photograph of us dancing on the silos in the drizzling rain.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: We did the action New Year's morning. So it was the period between Christmas and New Year that we did all the thinking and talking about it.

Suterwalla: '82?

Johnson: '82 going into '83. Yes. It was New Year's day on 1983. Then one woman was saying that she was convinced that we'd be shot if we did this. We'd be shot. It wouldn't just be Official Secrets Act. They would just shoot us as we went over the fence. So we said, 'No. We're going to need to make sure that they know we're not terrorists.' Even then, we were thinking about terrorists. Because there was the whole Irish terrorism. Greenham had always been considered one of the bases. So then first of all one woman said, 'Let's all dress in black. We'll do it at night and then they won't even see us.' That's what triggered another woman saying, 'No, no, no. We're going to get shot. If we look like terrorists, we're going to get shot.' So then another woman said, 'Well, let's go with no clothing at all. Let's go completely naked and then they can see we have no arms and we're women.' For a while this went round the circle with women saying, 'Oh, yes. That's a really good idea.'

Then it came to me, I think. Or maybe it came to someone before me. But I think it came to me. I said, 'I'm sorry. But no way am I going to do something like this completely naked. I'm sorry. We're trying to get press coverage of this. I really don't want to do this both because of my own body. My own body image and all of that. But I also don't think it's – it's New Year's day. It's freezing cold. We're going to be climbing over the fence. I think this is bonkers. If we're scared of being shot then we've got to have something bright on.' Then another woman said, 'Let's have florescent women's symbols on our clothing.' Then it kept going round in the circle. In

the end we all decided that we'd just wear what we wanted to wear. So actually nobody went naked.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: But some women did stick or sew or whatever or paint very florescent-coloured women symbols on to their clothing so that in fact if the police would come and pick us up in their headlights, that would shine very clearly. Where, as most of us, I mean myself included, but I just wore fairly robust clothing that would allow me to climb over barbed wire and would allow me to run. But here again was an interesting conversation about the purpose of clothing which might have place in your thesis.

Suterwalla: It comes back to your point about women wearing these high heels and stockings. Men have always dressed to be practical. They would dress in a way that has allowed them to gain that empowerment according to circumstance. Is it that the minute that women did it, it was really seen – the newspaper headlines devoted so many column inches to the fact that you were transgressive for doing it?

Johnson: Yes. You're quite right about that. Oh, and the other thing that maybe is a story, then we do have to finish, but you should have there is there was once a naked action. It was some years later. It was at Yellow Gate. It was after the area that we called The Sanctuary. No, it wasn't The Sanctuary. It was The Clearing. The area that we called The Clearing near Yellow Gate had been firebombed. In fact two or three –

Suterwalla: Do you know what year this was?

Johnson: Yes. I can work it out. It might have been '86.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Johnson: I think. It was the summer of either '85 or '86. But I think it might have been – anyway. I could work that out. But it had been firebombed. Although it happened in the daylight. So nobody was hurt or killed. Two or three tents had been in that clearing and they went up in smoke like what happened in Australia. Then this whole area looked like a wasteland from Nagasaki or Hiroshima. So on Hiroshima Day, or possibly Nagasaki Day, that I'd have to double check which of the days it was. But on one of those days, some

women decided that they would strip completely naked and cover themselves with blood and with ashes. They did a profoundly moving demonstration at the gate. It was absolutely shocking for the police to deal with them. Because the police sexualise women's bodies. A number of these women were very beautiful without their clothes. But they were corpses. They had deliberately made themselves into these terrifying images of death and corpses and charred bodies and laying down. The men, the soldiers and the police hated having to touch them and pick them up in this way. Didn't know what to do with them. Kept bringing blankets and throwing it over these women. So they were pretending it was for modesty. But really it was because they couldn't bear to see. Here again, it was women using their bodies, their naked bodies, even, for a purpose that had nothing whatsoever to do with sex, sexuality or sexual attraction. I didn't take part in that action, but I watched it.

Suterwalla: It's very interesting that the men just didn't know how to deal with it.

Johnson: But I found it profoundly powerful and moving. It was really a very profound action to see. It reduced me to tears.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Johnson: Then of course, once the women were taken to Newbury police station, they were really penalised for this. They weren't given blankets and things.

Suterwalla: They were still naked?

Johnson: They were still naked and they were freezing cold because the cells were really, really cold and they weren't being given – and we were putting clothes and blankets and in for them. They weren't getting them. So they were actually being punished for having used their bodies in that way. That was what I had feared. I hadn't wanted to put myself –

[Johnson asked for the next part of the conversation to be kept private, for this reason it has not been included in the transcript here].

Johnson (cont.): So that's why I chose not to do it. I was one of the support people for it. But for the time that the action was happening, it was perhaps one of the most powerful in terms of just confronting the police. It just happened. We didn't invite lots of women to come down. It was one of those actions that simply

emerged from who we were at the camp around Hiroshima and Nagasaki Day that summer. That's how it came about.

Suterwalla: Okay, ah, you're checking the time, well I think we might stop there because I'm conscious of the time and I know you have somewhere to get to. But thank you so much. You've given me loads to think about. What a fascinating experience. Thanks so much for sharing your thoughts and for your time. Is it okay if I email you if there's anything to follow up?

Johnson: Oh yes, of course, yes, oh, you are very welcome.

End

## **Beeban Kidron**

Interview date: 13 March 2009.

Location: Cross St Films, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and five minutes.

Start

Suterwalla: So really I'd like to start with why you went to Greenham, what your perspective would have been before you went there, and just start off really by thinking back to your first moments there and what they were like, how you felt when you arrived, what you saw, just to start our conversation.

Kidron: Okay. I think it's quite interesting why I went, in regard of what your project is, because I was actually at film school, and I had signed up to be a camera woman, specifically a documentary camera woman. However, when I got there, I was actually quite appalled by – in fact I wasn't a documentary – I was just a camera woman. I was the only woman on that side, and I remember being very, very upset by how straight and how sexist this area was. But I was also disadvantaged, because technically I knew nothing, and all the boys knew quite a lot. So it's that thing where women find themselves trapped in an attitude of equality, but actually being deskilled, as it were. Anyway, I decided that I needed to get out of the context of the film school in order to learn my trade, so that I could come in and be on an equal footing. With regard to that, I was politically interested in Greenham, and so me and another student decided to go down to Greenham for the day and do some filming.

Suterwalla: This was Amanda Richardson?

Kidron: Amanda, yes. We decided that we would go off and do some filming, and we would learn our trade.

Suterwalla: What year would this be?

Kidron: I think it must have been 1982, because we arrived on the morning of the 30,000 embrace the base event.

Suterwalla: December 12<sup>th</sup>?

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: Freezing cold?

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: What had you heard about Greenham before you got there? Did you know there was going to be a big event that day?

Kidron: Well, Amanda was, I think, in the left of the Labour Party, and very active, and was at the time – I don't want to tell her story. Anyway, it doesn't matter. She was active in the Labour Party in a very traditional sense. I come from a political family, like activist. The whole question of protest, and the whole idea of protest, was central to how we went on, what I thought was normal.

Suterwalla: Were you part of the feminist movement and the protest movements concerned with that?

Kidron: Do you know what, that's the odd thing, in that – do you know, it's a really funny thing, because from where you're sitting I probably look quite old. But actually, what the truth of the matter was, by anybody else's equation probably I was a feminist, but I was really too young, because we'd just missed it, us lot.

Suterwalla: How old were you in 1982? When were you born?

Kidron: Well, I was – yes, 1961. You do the maths. I was born in 1961. So yes, I've been on the Reclaim the Night things. I've been on the abortion demos. But actually my whole familiar thing was a revolutionary socialist thing. I worked on Women's Voice magazine when I was still at school, taking pictures.

Suterwalla: So that seems to me very aware of those issues and movements? Knowing what they're about and being affected by them?

Kidron: Oh yeah, I was hugely, hugely aware, but it was like the grown-ups were the feminists. They were really the feminists. I was like just peeping over the parapet. By the time I came of age, if you think about it, I actually ended up being like a throwback in Thatcher's Britain. So I came of age under

Thatcherism, but my politics were very much borrowed from the previous generation. If you asked me now, 'Are you or are you not a feminist?' I'm absolutely a feminist, and proud of it, and would not want to qualify that in any other way. But at the time, if I think about the day that I arrived there, I think we thought that we'd missed everything in 1982. We'd missed it.

Suterwalla: So you had been charting it in the newspapers, and just in general discussion?

Kidron: What, feminism, or Greenham?

Suterwalla: Greenham. Was it a big issue for you? It was on the map?

Kidron: Yes. It was on the map. It was certainly on the map, interestingly enough, to think – I don't really know. It may well have been Amanda, because she was more organised than I was, who got the flyer that said, 'Everyone come to Greenham'. We thought, 'Oh, yes, great. We can do that'. But here's the joke. We arrived, and I had the camera, and she had the sound. There's a really wonderful picture of us arriving on the first day, looking...Anyway, now remember it was so early. It was so misty. It was so misty, and it was – I'm just trying to think. I saw where they put the Turner pictures in the National Gallery the other day. It was funny. I turned the corner, I thought, 'God, this is like nothing else, Turner.' But it was like that. It was like that thing of it's there and not there. Because we were filming, because we were taking it seriously, we were really, really early. We went at dawn. And it was like there and not there. What I remember, which is not a visual memory, but what I really remember was the sound of feet. I remember the sound of feet, because there were a lot more people than I could have imagined would be there. The people were walking around the fence, and they were walking on the ground, the earth, and they were walking, and they were walking on the twigs. So I really, really remember the sound.

Suterwalla: So these are the women who had come for Embrace the Base, the massive demonstration?

Kidron: Yeah, the 30,000, the beginning of the 30,000. They were starting to arrive, and it was the arrival. What I remember is the sense of arrival. It wasn't just us. It was already more than. People had come all night.

Suterwalla: Did you feel that you had entered into a particular space that seemed very different to anything else? Was it a special kind of environment? How did you dress for that day, was it different to other days?

Kidron: Well, no, because we were there as film students. I definitely changed my dress in the year that I was involved. I was seven months at the camp, and I was three months editing, and then I was a Friend of Greenham for many, many years. So I definitely changed-

Suterwalla: I'd like to come back to that.

Kidron: Yes. But on that day – I think you'll see on this website. There's a picture of Amanda and I. I think we've got wet weather gear on the top, just normal boots, and we were – filming gear, yes? Again, if you look at the difference in how things have formalised around brands, and so on, the filming gear isn't even what it was. It was much more – filming gear looked more like posh people in the country gear. Do you know what I mean? It didn't look like Nike and wotsit. I can't think of any. I'm so un-brandly I can't think of any of them, but you know what I mean, North Face etc. so we were there. We were just trying to keep warm and dry. And we had the gear, so we had a lot of weight.

Suterwalla: What did the other women who were there look like to you when you first arrived?

Kidron: The first thing I remember was the fence, the stuff on the fence, and people putting stuff up. What did they look like? You see, I think what you have to remember is that 30,000 was sort of a breakthrough. So they didn't look like anything. They looked like everything. I think it's really important, if you're looking at that day specifically, to say that they looked like church groups. They looked like Women's Institute. Then they looked like CND. So it was everybody's mother. Yes? Then it looked like hippie dippy people with flowers in their hair. Then I suppose it looked like – which is probably what one's beginning to get at about perception and so on – it looked like some post-punk people. I was post-punk. I wasn't that day, but I was post-punk, as in I wasn't punk anymore. There's nothing punk about me until a bit later. But I had been a punk.

Suterwalla: Ah. That's very interesting to me because my first chapter is about punks. So it's interesting that punks were at Greenham, in the sense that there is continuity in the expression. Does that seem right?

Kidron: Yes. Yeah. When I was 16 or 17. So what was that, punk time, 1979? That's punk time, isn't it?

Suterwalla: Did you live in London?

Kidron: Well, the trouble is, I might be too interesting for you. But I actually was – I was a punk in London, but the real thing of my punkdom was that I left London, and I went to San Francisco, where there were no punks. We jokingly used to say that I was San Francisco's first punk rocker.

Suterwalla: Wow!

Kidron: Yes, because I arrived and I actually stayed in Oakland.

Suterwalla: Oh yes, I know Oakland.

Kidron: I stayed in Oakland, and I knew one English guy there, and through him I met some Americans. Then some of the women started dressing like me, because they'd heard of punk. But it was not yet there. I was never – look at me now. I was never fashionable. I've never been a fashion person. But what you have to understand was that punk was a British phenomenon. So for me to not be – whether you call me an early adopter, or whether you just call me an adopter – I would say I was an adopter – I think by London standards I was pretty low key. I had five earrings in, but had nothing. I had green stripe in my hair, and I had plastic clothes. But I think if you'd been in LA or New York you would have seen people who had already picked it up. But also we were the pre-internet generation. We were the pre-mobile generation. Things moved slower. So I could be in San Francisco, looking like that, and people would know me on the street, not meaning for that to be my calling card at all. I was just a late – not late, just an adopter. I wasn't early, wasn't late, I was in there. That was my thing. I loved it. It was about music, and so on. I know that the first time I heard Iggy Pop I was the only person dressed like that. The second time I saw Iggy Pop everyone was dressed like that. So that's the joke. That was the joke, that I was... But I have to stress, for the purposes of this conversation, I am not interested in fashion. I'm not 'not' interested. As in I'm interested-

Suterwalla: Do you mean you're not about consuming fashion or brands, but that you still care about your style?

Kidron: I'm anti brand, and I-, I'm anti-brand.

Suterwalla: Coming from the politics of the 1970s, for you was the rejection of fashion as you say part of the rejection of particularly 1980s consumerism maybe? Was it part of the times, the climate of socio-economic Britain in the late 1970s and then 1980s that made you have that view?

Kidron: I think the thing is if you grow into punk as your first thing, and it's all ripped and torn, and wayward, then your attitude is that your look is to do with your position in the world. So there's a politicisation of the look. You could say that was started by the hippies. It was probably not. It was probably started by some Edwardians or whatever. But in my lifetime you could say actually that's nothing. Punk is a reaction to the hippies, which were a reaction to the things...But if, in the timeline that you probably know more about than I do, you grow into punk, and then punk is sort of like, 'Fuck you', and your dress is, 'Fuck you', then when you grow out of punk it would be really weird to grow into, 'I'm a baby doll.' So you grow into 'Dressing up is not my thing.'

Suterwalla: Okay yes, that makes sense, I can see that.

Kidron: Because I can probably say there are two things – and if I'm going too far away from what you want to know, just edge me back, because...

Suterwalla: It's the identity construction that's the key.

Kidron: Well, this is the two things that I would say. One thing is that from the age of 21, after Greenham, post Greenham, I have worked exclusively in a field that was dominated by men. Therefore all the clothing choices were about de-feminisation, not attracting attention, at any level. I never showed up to a wrap party in a dress, never had cleavage on the set, never had anything, anything, anything. The whole thing was about that, as a working woman. But secondly, if you work in an area that is somewhat practical – and there are manual labour aspects even for directors, certainly for DPs – you're then very practical. So we were the first lot into – it doesn't matter generationally, but we were the first lot into Doc Martens, or Timberlands,

or whatever the next phase is of that. We were the first ones into sneakers etc. But they weren't fashionable. We were like-

Suterwalla: Utilitarian.

Kidron: We were utilitarian. So if you go punk rock, my clothing means, 'Don't judge me', or, 'Do judge me to be dangerous. Then you go can't adopt any kind of feminisation within the clothing. Plus you've got to be warm. You've got to be dry. You've got to be standing on your feet all day. You end up with a very, very specific thing that probably owes more to an American cowboy, or an American workman, than it does to any other single strand of how you think you look.

Suterwalla: So how does that get presented at Greenham, if you think it does?

Kidron: Yes. I think a huge part of Greenham was about the practicalities. About the utilitarian.

Suterwalla: So coming back to the day that you arrived, the march happened on that day, December 12<sup>th</sup>, and then you went home? That day of course everyone was there, so it was just -

Kidron: Yes. That's why I was trying to say you couldn't see who was who. You didn't know who was who. Because there was the – because it got nasty. In fact it got nasty the next morning. I don't know how much you know about that. But anyway, it was all celebrating, 'Ha, ha, ha, ha.' Then we did the sit down business, and once they sat down the police came, and it was nasty. We had the nasty footage in the film, and that was it. That was it. I was there. We were-

Suterwalla: Yes I've seen the films and the scenes of eviction that you show, and the police arriving, I had a look at that. Can you describe that more?

Kidron: Yes, all of that. It did get nasty, eventually. But it was pretty nasty, because they didn't know they had to be nice, and they didn't know they'd be caught. It was just one of those funny moments where they're not yet conscious, because something has gone ahead of them, and it was before they understood it again. There was a bit of a lag, a police consciousness lag. Well, I knew after that day that that's where I needed to be. In fact I think, if I'm right, we drove back – it was a weekend. We drove back to film

school, and we marched into the director of the film school and said, 'We need this. This is what we're going to do for the next term. We need the gear. We need this. We need your support. We need to take it.' I think he said, 'Don't tell them I said yes, but just go.' And off we went.

Suterwalla: Did you know how long you were going to go for?

Kidron: No, not really.

Suterwalla: So you took just weekend bags, or did you pack a lot of clothes and gear?

Kidron: No. Well, at the time we didn't – eventually we worked out a whole system of safe houses, where we could use electricity, and so on. But actually, at the time, we used to go up for two or three days, then maybe go back on a Wednesday to charge up all our batteries, and then come back up, and so on. Then very quickly we found people in Newbury who would let us do all that.

Suterwalla: So when you went there that second time, then, to start the more permanent project, did you go to Yellow Gate?

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: You started there. Was that the main gate where everyone was?

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: What was the vibe there?

Kidron: If you actually do see Amanda, she might remember some names, but I don't remember names.

Suterwalla: This must be 1983 now?

Kidron: Yes. Was the going inside the base 1984 or 1983?

Suterwalla: The dancing on the silos?

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: I think that was 1983. Not sure off the top of my head...

Kidron: Well, no, so then – because we were there that night.

Suterwalla: Right, okay, so...

Kidron: So we'd already been there a little – so we must have been there from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the...not exactly sure, have to think about that...

Suterwalla: Right, okay.

Kidron: Do you see what I mean? It doesn't seem like very much time. But actually, it's a lot of time, given that...All I remember was we were not unwelcome, because we were women. We were not particularly welcome, because we had all these cameras, and that wasn't necessarily the thing. Some of the women were highfalutin, and some were very lovely. When I say highfalutin, I'm thinking of one woman who was a bit like an animal, just, 'Get off my patch.' They looked like something.

Suterwalla: In the literature that I've read so far and from the stuff I've looked at it's like either people are incredibly glorifying the heroics of these women, and it whitewashes the differences in opinion, the conflict, the tensions. I want to know what it was really like in the everyday there?

Kidron: Well, we tried to show problems in the film, in 'Carry Greenham Home'. But the trouble is that life is really interesting in the big idea, and it's really interesting in the detail, and practically everything in-between is not very interesting. So what I'd say of the big idea is that unlike anywhere else I've ever lived, in my life, Greenham was phenomenally relaxing. Because you lived in a community with whose general aims you agreed. That is something that very few of us really, really experience, and it's something that you may not feel, or people may not feel, provides tension for them. But actually I believe it does. So if I say that I am represented by Greenham Common for this period of my life, which is dedicated to peace, which is vibrant, and creative-

Suterwalla: How is it vibrant and creative?

Kidron: Well, it's vibrant because – let me just do my list, and I'll come back to that. It's vibrant, creative, and then had a sort of a nominal sense of not only

democracy, but that notion of the perfect democracy that is ever-changing. Then-

Suterwalla: What do you mean by that?

Kidron: The whole idea of a perfect democracy is not that you can find it, but that it always changes according to the needs of the people. It was our vibrancy and our creativity that was going to change the world. Vibrant – I mean literally the colours, literally the energy. That’s what I’m trying to get at. In the bigger sense, you think about the fucking lethargy of the people out there. The world is collapsing and who’s on the street? I do not see anybody. The vibrancy was the will to put themselves, literally, physically, emotionally, morally, in the way of the machine of the state. So it was vibrant. Creative – do you know what? There were banners. There was art. There was hair dye. There were plaits. There were jumpers. There were tents. There was art. There was everything. A lot of it is not to my taste, but the life, the life of self-expression, and the life of every day starting up with the process of imagining your day, in pursuit of a general goal that we all agreed with, is a very, very powerful thing. So I actually think that, in the biggest sense, it was the best place I’ve ever lived.

Suterwalla: Wow.

Kidron: In the biggest sense. In the detail sense, it’s ludicrous to suggest that there wouldn’t be conflict. But who’s bloody saying that conflict isn’t a decent and good thing? There were many conflicts. But if I say to you take any family, any extended family, and look at it. The conflicts at Greenham were the same sort of things that you get in families. I think that what I would say about families is that they’re the best and the worst. At their best there’s an unspoken loyalty, longevity, trust, ‘in it together’ kind of thing. At its worst it hides power structures, and abuse, etc. I think Greenham was a middle range family. It wasn’t a horrendous one, where everybody’s keeping the secret. It wasn’t highly evolved, where everybody’s at one, marching together. But it was in that spectrum, right in the middle, and it was very functional.

Suterwalla: Coming back to the vibrancy, and the creativity, how did dress play a part in that? You mentioned jumpers, and all the rest of it, but can you expand, for instance what did it mean more in terms of the freedom of not having to dress up for anything in particular?

Kidron: I think we should just say it the way it is. They weren't dressing up for men. Now, if you look at what women wear – now I can't remember the exact thing, although I do think that when I finally got to LA, at the end of that decade, I probably – I had shoulder pads like everybody else. But the truth of the matter is that a lot of how women dress is about the dance of – I don't know how to say it. It's like there's a season. If you take a woman, then there is a cycle or a season of how they behave. So when they're younger they're attracting people. Then, as they get older, they're in a way displaying status of different varieties, whether it's wedding status, or financial status, or professional status. But their clothes have a lot to do with that. Then I think as women get a little bit older, and they feel themselves disappearing a bit, they start the attracting thing again, often in inappropriate ways, but actually sometimes in quite good ways. Then they settle down into a comfort zone of practicality, and desexualised things, which means that people like me look more like people in their 60s, in terms of their clothes, than perhaps where we're supposed to be in that cycle. So at Greenham you've got two or three or four contributing factors. They're not dressing for men; they're dressing for the weather, which as we all know in this country is lousy. So there are many layers. Certainly towards the end of my time in there the evictions were daily. So they didn't have very much stuff, and the whole thing of layering, which is absolutely hilarious... Looking at my daughter now, who's twelve: the layers and layers and layers, and under the school uniform they all wear a fancy vest that peeps out, until the teacher says enough... it's really excellent.

Suterwalla: Layers as subversive?

Kidron: It's very subversive – it's bizarre. But it is very funny that they all have this thing, and it's like you can't keep them back. Shit brown envelope – shit brown envelope? And this little thing peeking out to annoy Miss. Harper. Certainly towards the end of my time evictions were daily so we didn't have many things. So you wore like a snail your house on your back. That's one thing. The other thing is they didn't have any money if they didn't work, because they lived on donations, and the provision of clothes is not really on in that circumstance. They had donations of clothes, and they had donations of things. That made a split. So a lot of people made their own things, and knitted, and sewed, and so on.

Then a lot of things were donated. So they were from a particular – if you dressed only from Oxfam, you'd look different, even though Oxfam gets everything. It's just how it is. So there you've got everybody's got everything on their back. There you've got you're not dressing up for men. There you've got the fact that you're not buying anything new. You've got a very high proportion, for the twentieth century, of home-made clothes that women made at the camp because they didn't have much stuff. So it was homemade without particular skills. They just started doing that. Then you get woven into that, literally, an earth mother thing, a nature thing, which is to do with the fact that we live on the earth, we shit on the earth, we are of the earth, we're protecting the earth, the moon, the sun, the stars, and this was the rainbow aesthetic, which made sense in the schema. I think you get really, really quickly to a look. If you put all those conditions, on any group of people, I believe they would come out looking more or less like that. Do you see what I mean?

Suterwalla:

That makes me think about the use of craft actually, the revival of craft in this, and the fact that it's women doing craft, and the fact that it's connecting women with craft and those skills. But is it that actually there's a kind of subversive stitch in there? Because you're taking all this stuff, taking it out of the capitalist system, if you like, sharing it around, it's communal, and you're doing your own thing with it, making it your own? Is that a possible understanding? So you've broken down all of the layers of conventional dress and styles and traditions and ways of shopping for clothes that would have existed 20 miles away, or whatever, in Newbury?

Kidron:

But if you think about it, if you think about any long-term protest, or any group that steps out of the current thing, they create a look. Just because I've seen it recently, if you look at the Che film, about Che Guevara, and I say to you 'Guerrilla' – political guerrillas as opposed to the other one – you have an immediate image: berets, army clothes, big boots. The adoption is practical. It's army. They were the army of peace at Greenham. I won't tell you the whole thing about the Che film, because that's not relevant to you. But what I'm saying is it was – I don't know about using the word army, but if you want to call it army, I don't mind – a grouping, a marching, a marching of a politic that had a look, and that look was part of its politic, and it came from the traditions.

Suterwalla: Was its proximity to the military base the thing that made ideas of 'army' come up? Did that have an influence? Was there a process of inversion, or mirroring, that was part of the way that the women went about their tactics?

Kidron: Their dressing tactics or their tactic tactics?

Suterwalla: Both. I mean many if not most of the women said to me 'We wore army surplus trousers.' Now they said, 'We wore them because they were the most practical thing to wear in the outdoor.' But when you're looking at that symmetry, it's quite interesting that on one side of the fence you've got the army, with trousers on, and on the other side of the fence you've got the women, with similar trousers on as well.

Kidron: I don't know, because I'm not that au fait with it, but I think there's definitely something in that, and I think that's interesting. That inversion thing. Being next to those soldiers played a big part. And you were outdoors. I seem to remember around that time – and maybe even from the punk bit – there was all that working men's trousers with the hammer holds. I would say – and what do I know? I would say that's – what do you call it when someone's looking backwards and making it up?

Suterwalla: I'm not sure...?

Kidron: I think it's some sort of revision statement, personally.

Suterwalla: What do you mean?

Kidron: Now, who am I to say? I'm not an expert. What I would say, and it's more difficult to say, it's definitely like a mirroring. But I think also that the irony of the women was that they penetrated the men, if you're really looking for feminist language about it. What they did was they kept on trying to neutralise the fence. They neutralised it in many ways. They neutralised it by decorating it and in particular by webbing it. That whole earth mother thing that I was going on about is really important, because they neutralised it visually. They then neutralised it in more officious ways, like cutting it, climbing over it. I think that that was very powerful. Now, my favourite of all my times at Greenham, and I was there so much, and I saw so many different things, but my favourite one, because I felt it was like the absolute pinnacle of their understanding of what they were doing, was the 'teddy bears' picnic'.

So when they went over the fence, in costume, they did two things. One was that they had a happy-clappy occasion, on the wrong side of the fence. They all – I can't remember what they were like, but literally teddy bears and – I'd have to literally look at the film, but you could do that. But they had all this fancy dress. They looked like children. They infantilised the other side of the fence. But the best bit was they covered themselves in honey, so as soon as the guys grabbed them, they were filthy, and they made the soldiers revolting or filthy. I think that making the fence porous, and making the soldiers ludicrous, and celebrating their values of dance, theatre, music, colour, collectivity, was very, very, very undermining. It made the other side look stiff, and unprepared, and over-armed, and under-prepared. It looked ludicrous. I think that if you then take that notion of the teddy bears' picnic as being the absolute point of what they're doing, and then you actually look at them, lined up in their clothes, and go, 'Well, that's what they were doing all the time.' They were undermining the bought. They were undermining consumerism. They were undermining masculine notions of how women should be. They were undermining fathers' ideas of what girls should be. They were undermining soldiers' ideas about what protesters should be. They were undermining with their visual thing.

I come back to the punk thing. Do you know what, on the one hand you can say it's provocative, and dirty, and revolting. I used to walk round with this – I might even have it somewhere, but a plastic t-shirt, with a slit. It was rubber, with a slit right there, and it went just over one nipple and through there, so you could see the body in-between and no bra. That's what I wore with my black plastic trousers. But it wasn't a come-on. It was a 'Fuck Off.' I think that the idea of the self and the body as a form of protest is consistent in the Greenham look. But I don't think anybody sat down intellectually and went, 'We are going to dress like this in order that...' But I do think that one should see it like that, precisely like that.

Suterwalla:

Do you think they felt that they were successful, at the time, not after, rather than when the missiles left? What about during the day-to-day, did they feel successful, did they feel that they were subverting, if you like, everyday rules and conventions in the way that the protest developed, in the way they were living around base?

Kidron:

I think there were bad days/good days. But on the whole, definitely, it was alternative, they were creating something different that they could believe in, where they could relax. No. I think they felt – I don't think successful is

the right word. I think empowered is the right word. I think that the women felt that here was a place where they could come, they could voice their protest about this specific thing...I don't think people consciously went, 'Oh, here's a world with whose aims I agree with, and therefore I can express myself.' I think they could throw off the ties that bound them elsewhere. Here's a for example. We had all those terrible meetings about who was going to speak where, and who was going to do this, and whether someone...I think you should also be aware that I think that the benders, as they were called, were also clothing. When your house is constantly removed...and when you don't have many clothes, I think that the houses were their clothes, and how they decorated them, and how they lived within them, because they were more like tortoises than people who live in buildings.

Suterwalla: That's a very interesting notion of clothing and housing.

Kidron: But I think that that's something to look at.

Suterwalla: Actually some of the women have mentioned to me how much pride they were taking in their benders and how devastated they felt when they were destroyed.

Kidron: Yes. I can't really explain why, but I do think it's really part of the space. If you talk about space, that was personal space in a public arena, and possibly also the only time they ever got either naked or lightly dressed. The constant jumper. Oh God, what were you asking? I think there were definitely good days/bad days. But I felt, without question, it wasn't so much that they were winning the exact argument. Because there are two different views: it was won elsewhere, or it was won there. It doesn't really matter. What they were winning was the argument that there was nothing you could do. And also that women could do what they wanted to do. I think that that argument was made, and has consistently been made throughout history. I think – and this is a very personal view, and probably outside of the remit of what you're doing, but until two million of us marched against the war, and they ignored us...Because I am from a generation no-one could ever imagine that. We always thought that if two million people marched, then there it was. It was all about activating everybody. But if you take two million people marching, knowing full well that they represent double that, and that it's a double digit percentage of the population... Do you know what I mean?

Suterwalla: Yes.

Kidron: It wasn't until then that I ever thought that you could do nothing. So it's about empowerment and disabling people's political will. So it's not whether they were successful or not. But they were very, very successful. If you look at the third runway actions, even those terrible justice father people, and actually the pro-hunt people, on the right and on the left, they're Greenhamesque, in the theatre of it. I think, yes, they were enormously successful, but maybe not in a literal way.

Suterwalla: You use the word theatre.

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: Would you also describe the atmosphere there as carnivalesque? Was there a lot of playing around, humour, joking...?

Kidron: Well, of course it was. It was...

Suterwalla: I'm interested in the way that the body was used at Greenham for protest and for expression of women's feelings and desires. The whole of the body. It wasn't just your face or your mouth that was being engaged. It was the fact that you were physically there protesting, but you were being evicted, physically. These are harsh things. But also the women are having fun, having a laugh in a lot of the representation. Do you think that that element of theatre was the thing that was picked up as being transgressive? Was there this idea that because there were so many women, and because they were outside of conventional space...?

Kidron: I think what is kind of hopeless about the media – completely hopeless – is that the reason that they were thought to be transgressive was to do with their sexuality, end of story. Do you know what I mean? It's the exclusion of men, and the knock-on fact of the sexuality. But if you take that out of there, it is theatrical to live in the street, especially if you don't have to. I know more about the guy who sleeps on near the church than I do about the person who lives opposite. I just do, because I see him more often. I know how he puts the cardboard in one kind of weather, and another in the other kind of weather, and I can see whether he's wearing his blue socks or his green socks. Do you know what I mean? I'm actually really, really aware of every detail of his being, and his housing, and so on, because I often go

down that way early in the morning. But I think if you're going back to this idea of the theatrical, the protest was theatrical, because the protest was designed to attract attention. The clothes were gay. Not in that sense, but in the sense of a circus, because the protest was theatrical, because it was designed to attract attention. Do you know what I mean? If they'd built huts, and sat inside, and never came out, what was the fucking point? I think that the alternative is a result of the conditions. I don't think alternative was the style choice. I think that's really important.

Suterwalla: Could you expand on that?

Kidron: Well, I sort of half said it before, when I said if you take all these series of things, and put it in any group, they will turn into this. I went riding with my son on holiday. We went in as two people who never rode really. I rode in my past, but he'd never ridden at all. In the beginning of the week we looked one thing. By the end of the week we looked like all those horsey people, with their jodhpurs hanging off, etc. Because that is what horsey people have determined is the right way to be. Actually, the reason it's the right way to be is because it works. So you've got to look at the conditions under which people find themselves, because actually...Let's think about it the other way. I've just been with my mother-in-law, and she was talking about putting on her face. Northern working class, 'Oh, I have to get up and put on my face.' I was laughing, and I said, 'It must be such a disappointment for you to have a daughter-in-law who doesn't have a face to put on.' We were pissing ourselves. It was funny. It was good. Then she mentioned a time when I had worn make-up, and how beautiful she thought I was on that one occasion. Do you know what I mean? It was a really interesting conversation about how I saw myself, how she saw me, about what she thought I was doing with my face, or not my face.

So let's say we could go and put her in those circumstances. Here is a woman who thinks she's going to get up and have a shower. But she's not. Here's a woman who thinks there's going to be central heating. There's not. Here's a woman who thinks she must take her mirror, and her lippy, and put her eyebrows on, which she might, and could. Here's a woman who never, to my knowledge, has ever had a speck of dirt on her body, on the external body, crisp, in that way that working class people do. She couldn't maintain that. Now, if she was transported into the Greenham world, because of her faith, belief, politics, whatever it is, she may well spend quite a lot of time cleaning, and hanging up, and so on, until the eviction. She may well have

three jumpers, or may well send them to someone else. She may well keep on putting on her face. But you can just see that that sort of smoothing of the stern that the water does, that the sea does – I bet you by the end of seven months in Greenham she'd have no face on. Because a face is not necessary at Greenham. In fact a face is a – not a burden, it's an impression at Greenham. Not because anyone's sitting there going, 'Don't put your face on. What kind of woman are you? This is a political place.' But because you're not going to see a mirror, and you're not going to see a thing, and you're engaged in a – and you're worried about your stuff. You don't need anything extra. You need what you have in your being. You need your imagination. You need your body. You need something to keep you warm. I think that that woman would transform. She'd always be neater than the one there, who was ready to give it all up, and came from the hippie thing. But she'd give up her face.

Suterwalla: This idea of oppression – the archives suggest, and some of the stuff that I read, says that there was a great freedom in the dirt.

Kidron: Yes.

Suterwalla: Some of them thought it was gross, and some of them thought, 'Great. I don't have to do any housekeeping.' I'd love to hear how that element of just freeing yourself played out in the day-to-day. But my other question is also around what happened when the camp started to become much more of a kind of – to adopt much more of a lesbian identity, and starting attracting a lot of attention for that? Was this the dominant identity after a while? Did women feel they had to fit into that?

Kidron: Well, it's difficult, because I probably am part of that other era. Do you know what I mean? In that there was definitely loads of – there were a huge number of lesbian women. But, do you know what, do the maths. It makes a lot more sense. It's a very safe place. They're mainly not having kids, although I was there at the birth of a Greenham boy, and all of that. It was a free space at Greenham to be a woman and to breastfeed and to look after your children in a place where people understood what that meant; and this was at a time when it just wasn't that easy for women bringing up kids.

Suterwalla: One interviewee said to me that she was given a hard time by some women who said to her, 'You don't look lesbian enough.'

Kidron: Well, I never heard that. It was inevitable that it would attract some lesbian separatist groups. I don't think it was the prevailing attitude. I do think there were a lot of women having sex with other women, but that is actually something different. Lesbian separatism is a political position that excludes men entirely, and excludes a lot of straight women. I'm not up for that. I'm not interested in that.

Suterwalla: Isn't that what Green Gate was about?

Kidron: Do you know, the whole separating of the gates, and the many different gates, although I went to many of them, many times, I can hand on my heart – and I hope you can see I am not a shirker. I'll say anything, even if it's bad. In all my time I never didn't feel lesbian enough. In all my time those women that wanted to be in their own space were allowed to be, without worry or comment, and those other women who were in a more inclusive space were in that space. That is part of the democracy of it, that it can allow both things to be true. It wasn't like if you didn't go to Green Gate you were a *schlub*. If you didn't go to Green Gate you went to Yellow Gate. If you didn't go to Yellow Gate you went to arty farty gate. I can't remember what it was. I do know all this stuff, and it does all rumble on, and da di da di da. Do you know what, from my personal set of politics, being there 10 years after the missiles have left, now that's sad. That's weird, making it a lifestyle instead of protest. I think that's weird. Being a lesbian separatist is not weird, so long as everybody at the next-door thing can be whatever they want to be. I think the thing is you have to be really careful – and I know that's the whole point of what you're doing, but I think one has to be really careful. Not only in your analysis of what all that meant, but also in the participants' lack of analysis of how they experienced it. I do not agree with the politics of Malcolm X. Did Malcolm X make a huge contribution to the civil rights movement in America? Yes, he did. Could you perhaps say from that that there had to be a Malcolm X in order for there to be a mainstream something else? Did he not need to formalise and articulate that anger that could not tolerate white people being part of the struggle? Yes, he did. Yes, it was necessary.

I think what really pisses me off, if I'm honest, is that people do not attribute enough intellectual importance to that struggle, to give it a proper place, and then it's all that sort of mucking about in the thing. As I said, I think there was conflict. You tell me where there isn't conflict. I do think there were some separate views. Is that a bad thing? I don't think so. So it's not

whitewash honeysuckle. It's that sometimes there's a lack of why are we not treating ourselves as seriously as the civil rights movement? Why not? Is that the fucking problem of anything done by women, is that it's never taken seriously enough to get the correct analysis? Why is it we made up this little army of – this uniform of lesbian separatism? We didn't. We lived under a set of circumstances that I would like to see compared to Che Guevara. Excuse me, let's get real here. I'm not saying it's more important than anything else, but in this house we have a very, very funny thing, because I was involved in Greenham, and my old man was involved in the miners' strike. You tell me which one has survived until the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a proper historical event. I did that whole website around the thing of Greenham, and there was a little flurry in the papers. Then this week it's 25 years of the miners' strike, just this week, and he's doing all his stuff. It's just absolutely astonishing the different levels of attention they're getting. But they were protests going on at the same time.

Suterwalla: But then wasn't it frustrating that so much attention's been given to that point, about lesbianism and transgression?

Kidron: Yes, but that's why I made my film. That was why I was there. Remember my story right at the beginning, that I was learning to do the camera, and learning to hand-hold, and learning to work out how to be a camera woman? The irony was that when I finally went back to film school, which was a year later, having missed the whole of the first year, I was the best hand-held camera-woman in the film school. I could do it better than anyone. That's how I started shooting features, was being the person who could carry the camera, which is ironic given men/women weight, all the bullshit. So that was interesting. But what actually happened was seven months in there was such a wave of ugly press, such a wave of attack, that I just – I remember turning around to Amanda, and going, 'Do you know what? It's lies, and we have to go and tell the truth. We have to tell our truth.' That's when we left Greenham to make a film. We didn't really think we were making a film until the moment that we were trying to redress the balance of what was being said. 'Carry Greenham Home' is in fact us saying, 'This is Greenham. Ignore all that other stuff.' So I say to you, 'Excuse me, look at the media. Look at what it's done. Look at the irresponsibility, not of what it says, but of its agenda.' It's like, 'Obviously you're dealing with a nutter.' I lie in bed and I yell at The Today Programme, because they're not asking the right question. Why are they not asking why Thatcher deregulated the city 25 years ago? Everybody knew it was going to end like this, they just

wanted to be rich on the way. Why are they not asking that? But they're going, 'Gordon Brown, say sorry.' We don't want sorry. We want them to stop paying off the bankers and start paying our mortgages. Do you know what I mean? I know I'm like the nutter thingy, but what I'm saying is the agenda is wrong. The agenda is wrong. You cannot accept the agenda. They think that's transgressive. They're looking for transgressive, and you can't afford to look at it from that point of view. You've got to go, 'Okay, big picture, detail.'

Suterwalla: But that's why I think the actual experiences – that's why I'm addressing this the actual experiences of people who lived there, because I don't want to address it from the point of view of perception.

Kidron: Yes, it's bollocks.

Suterwalla: What happened individually to those women in terms of their own trust, their faith in the other women, the sense of community, the personal growth of women who were there? I know you can't speak for them, but in your view?

Kidron: It was incredible.

Suterwalla: Yes, can you say more about this?

Kidron: Well, that's probably where I should end up, because maybe that brings us full circle to the end. If I was bold, I would say – I don't know how many thousands of women went through Greenham, but I would say that probably in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, right at the top – I don't want to say 100% because there's always something. But I think women who went to Greenham found their voice, loved their body, found their brave courage, and possibly their physicality, which is separate from their body. I think probably to a woman they found a sense of expression... that they would not have found without Greenham. So I would say myself that my life would have been entirely different if I hadn't spent the time I spent in Greenham. What's more, I think that is true of everybody. It's a bit like people who have been in an army, been in a cult, been at boarding school. I don't know what it is, but it's about that being part of a church or a community for a very long time. That if you take it seriously, and you're putting your heart and your behaviour really at the centre of that, it transforms your life.

Suterwalla: Thank you Beeban. I think I've taken more of your time than planned, I think this might be a good place to stop and is it okay if I follow by email if there's anything that I need to check...

Kidron: Yeah, that's great, that's fine [interview ends as Kidron's daughter arrives into the room...]

End

## Chapter 3 The Hip-Hop Break: 1984-1997

### Kym Mazelle

Interview date: 9 February 2011.

Location: Home House, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 9 minutes.

Start

- Suterwalla: So what I am doing is I am looking at the way that different women in Britain have used dress and style to construct what I am calling ‘alternative identities’. One of the case studies I am looking at is hip-hop and black women in hip-hop who were part of the scene in the 1980s and 1990s. So naturally you and Soul II Soul is massive for this study. So my focus is very much on black style and dress and the way that it had an impact on women, within the black community, what it meant to them and what it meant in terms of their forms of expression and new ways to express themselves as black women that was different from what they may have experienced before.
- Mazelle: That is a mouthful, you want to write that down! You need a pen and paper!
- Suterwalla: We can break it down. I will just take some notes as well if that is okay?
- Mazelle: Okay yes, that is fine.
- Suterwalla: Maybe the place to start is if you could just tell me about when you first moved over to the UK? What your impressions of black women within the black scene here was at that time?
- Mazelle: Okay well first of all my name is Mazelle and I am one of the – originally I came over here as one of the founders of house music, Chicago house music. The whole club scene was just – I guess we were kind of creating it. I guess during that period of time I had not come across that many black women, because they weren’t really in that environment. It wasn’t until after I did join Soul II Soul and I started hanging out more with Jazzie B and we started creating that second album that I started to see sort of like more an urban, I guess what you would call urban now, black communities. The women kind of – I mean I came over here with long extension braids. Down

to – hello, have mercy. Long fingernails and just glamour. The black women here were really quite dry.

Suterwalla: So in your experience you, and can I assume other black women in America were different to and had a very different style to the black women you encountered when you came to Britain?

Mazelle: It was just – I think America was – black America was definitely more advanced because even here, I mean the perms and all that stuff hadn't really happened. I mean it is not until this generation of young black women that you really see really quite put together. When I first came over it wasn't that cute!

Suterwalla: What do you mean by cute?

Mazelle: No. It wasn't. It was kind of like –

Suterwalla: What kind of stuff were they –

Mazelle: They were just – oh it was –

Suterwalla: What year are we talking about?

Mazelle: We are talking 1988, '89, '90, '91, '92. It was just a bit – you had like Neneh Cherry that was doing like the copying – she was copying like a lot of the – like the dolphin earrings that we used to wear in the States. So you know, it started to spill over, but as far as like the darker skin of the black woman, it was either the braids or just really bad hair days everyday from what I saw. It was just like 'Somebody help us!' So from that it was like lots of – I mean we had our braids. Individual braids. Really long and some of the girls in Soul II Soul kind of picking up on the thing and had kind of dreadlocks. So then I guess, I mean I picked it up on the African style, the braids I guess. You know kind of the UK and Britain, the in between America and Africa you kind of pull from both looks, you know? Here a lot of the black women wore dreadlocks. You know, especially the ones in Brixton. The women, the black women in Brixton tend to kind of have it a bit more together, I found from my meetings than the ones like come in the West and or that were out from East London and that whole area. Do you know what I mean?

Suterwalla: Did you spend time in Brixton, at Brixton Market and –

Mazelle: The women from there may have been putting it together from Brixton Market because they totally had a vibe and they totally had it together. You know, because I remember when I went up to Brixton and I just thought ‘Okay, I get it now.’ Even Camden, like Camden Market area but, you know I ventured out when I first came here. I was just a bit – an adventurous person, you know? I was just kind of – number one, because most of my surroundings were in dance/pop music cross over – you know? Originally. So there wasn’t really – I was the only black girl on the scene really in that scene really. So you know, when I would try to get my hair done and go and do like Top of the Pops and different things with the BBC, they had their own makeup artist that you had to use and their own hair person. I was horrified, because they didn’t know what to do with my hair.

Suterwalla: So coming back to how you were putting your style together at that time, you’re saying you went to markets, like Brixton, and what did you find there that appealed? Where did you get your hair done?

Mazelle: I used to fly back to America to get my hair done. I flew back to America to get my hair done quite often for about –

Suterwalla: Why, why didn’t you have it done here? The braids, right?

Mazelle: Yes, not to the – not if you knew how they did it in America and you did it here. There was a few places like Aquarius Hair. They were amazing but it took me a while to find them.

Suterwalla: Where were they?

Mazelle: They were in Finsbury Park. They are still there now. I found them again and just had, like, my hair it is natural, had it blow-dried and all that. They are brilliant with hair. The young lady that ran the place, Sharon, she was brilliant with like the beads and getting the hair – I don’t know where she got it from. But she was in tune back then with like LA and America. She’d get stuff sent over.

Suterwalla: Right. So keeping an American influence was really important to you then in creating your look?

Mazelle: You know, she would get stuff sent over. Because she was working in the main stream of the music industry as well. Not just, you know your corner kind of shop which just kind of did the best they could. But she was a bit more, savvy about things. There was another place in –

Suterwalla: Where were you living at this time?

Mazelle: Gosh, I was living in South Kensington.

Suterwalla: Which must have been very white. I mean it is –

Mazelle: I lived in South Kensington in The Boltons.

Suterwalla: So I would imagine back then you know, about your hair – I can't imagine there would have been that many places –

Mazelle: Yes, it wasn't around. But even – like I said I had to venture out and when I ventured out it still didn't have the level of like the hairdressers in Chicago. Because I had just left Andre Walker from doing my hair, who has now been doing Oprah's hair for 25 years. So I mean he just had the products.

Suterwalla: Right, right. Okay so that seems very professional and high profile and different to what ordinary women in America would have had anyway?

Mazelle: He manufactured them in the States. You know you had like Johnson haircare products, you had Bonner haircare products. You had all that there. There was just – you know they were experimenting a lot here. I remember even in Mayfair there was a nice hair shop owned by a black guy. You know, they took my hair out. They put some hair product in my hair, rinsed it. The girl had no training. So they never took the neutraliser off my hair, after my perm. They washed it. It was still activating and all my hair fell out. This is in 1992. Okay? They charged me £150. Okay? She didn't even know how to wash out relaxant and this is with women and hair. You know? Really great supposedly, 'We do all the black hair that comes to the UK.' They just you know, it was outside packaging good. But they did not know really the mechanics. So –

Suterwalla: So black hair, and being able to look after your black hair and have your black hairstyles was really important to you. What about what you were wearing?

Mazelle: Oh, I think I was always glamorous darling! I was always glamorous but you know, kind of you know, very Diana Ross-ish, diva-ish, glittery, broad shouldered stuff. Leopard print, like what they have got out now. Leggings. High-heeled shoes. I mean the way it looks now it is almost identical to how I dressed. Then I also kept the kind of fresh – because there was a company that had just made these trainers and they were in the – I think Camden area. I mean I did a mixture of Camden Market, Brixton Market and then Covent Garden. Covent Garden had a lot of new trendy people. The company called Ghost, it was just starting. They made these amazing like –

Suterwalla: They made the dresses.

Mazelle: The dresses. Do you remember the dresses from Ghost? They were amazing. I still have two of them. I can't fit them but they were amazing. I believe they were like in Covent Garden. Then you had – well Pam Hogg was just starting and Vivienne Westwood. You had all these amazing trend things that you could get here that you just – you wouldn't find like that in America. I mean, you did use – the people were really young. Michelle Benassi, who did all the costumes for Soul II Soul, her leathers, you know, with eyelets on. She did a lot of the early things for me for my first videos. You know? Like my first tour. I was wearing trainers –

Suterwalla: So yes getting your outfits together for your tours is a big subject. So she was kind of your stylist? She would custom make your outfits for the tours? You would spend time going through what you wanted? How did all of that work?

Mazelle: We would spend time going through the – what was like – kind of like out between the States and between these designers and we would put stuff together. Because in America everything was still very – it still is now, it is contained. Do you know what I mean? It is this very – how would I say – conveyer belt-ish. Somebody gets an idea, it works, everybody copies it. Here, people have more free individual ideas everywhere. Nobody would try to copy somebody else. You know what I mean? In the design and in the clothing thing it was –

Suterwalla: So it was more kind of DIY customised?

Mazelle: Yes it was like, really like this. I mean I had shoes made for me and boots and kind of people coming on board. A few are like huge now. I am just trying to think of some of the names of the people. Steven Webster was like making jewellery for me. I had –

Suterwalla: Was this for the shows?

Mazelle: Patrick Cox and stuff- yes for the shows, for my lifestyle. Because the life and the shows kind of go hand in hand. You have to turn up somewhere at a party and go – so it has kind of been like that. Especially like over here and –

Suterwalla: Can I just take you back then? When you first arrived and you were – you had been in the pop scene, could you describe a typical day's outfit for me and how you put it together?

Mazelle: Okay a typical day's outfit –

Suterwalla: Then we will move on – so how it changed and how you set – because you became so iconic here and I want to get to that as a kind of –

Mazelle: It kind of might have started with the being iconic and that shaped into being more corporate and then going back out into it being more trendy. When I came from Chicago you know, we just sort of threw it together too.

Suterwalla: So take me through the typical day's –

Mazelle: Well when I first arrived we were in the underground vibe of house music. Just about to cross over into dance pop, because they didn't know where to put me. So I had my braids. I didn't have to do anything to my hair but just keep them groomed and conditioned. I had the long -

Suterwalla: How do you look after the braids? Is it just –

Mazelle: You could just wash the braids. You could just wash and condition. It took a long time because you had to saturate the hair and the braids were very long. So they were very heavy and were kind of similar to taking care of dreadlocks. So a lot of the stuff I just wash and leave it. You know? Just kind of tidy it up with spritzer, you know? Every other day, because you didn't want it to get too like – what is oily. You know? You never want it to

really get too oily. Then when it – the more it grew out, the more you had like a natural little main, kind of sort of halo. It kind of worked, if you know what I mean? So I just kind of put on like leggings, some leggings. Or they used to make these shiny black tights here, quite big. Woford had these – Woford I think is the name of the – had these body tights that were like a thin polo neck, very shiny and they matched the tights. So that would be my basic undergarment. I put anything on then from ripped jeans, high waist with a belt tied around it, to high shorts. Really like short shorts, Thigh boots.

I was out there, okay? I was thigh boots, mini skirt or thigh boots and hot pants. 'Daisy dukes' it is called – these little short-cropped jackets that you can get from Camden Market basically. They were suede and different multi colours. That was me – and a big old chain.

Suterwalla: None of it was designer? What about branded stuff?

Mazelle: No.

Suterwalla: It was all from the markets?

Mazelle: It was all from the markets.

Suterwalla: The jewellery? The chain? Was real or costume?

Mazelle: Yes, pretty much you would pick it up from Portobello Market. They were getting the – they were getting a lot of the stuff from like the Middle East, you know from Middle East. Some of it was like – I remember I had this thing that must have come from Turkey, because it was the hand. Kind of like open kind of hand thing. Later on I found it to be weird, but at first it was like, you know the colours. Wear this and this guy from Paris would find all these different pieces in these different markets. I mean some of it was semi-precious stone, like we used a lot of amber. I always wore amber and turquoise. Turquoise was my best friend.

Suterwalla: You would go to the market – it is such a creative process. Can you talk me through – can you remember how – so you would kind of arrive at Camden Market. How would –

Mazelle: I would arrive at the market and just go ‘Ooooh! I want this, this, this, this!’ ‘Oh really? That doesn’t fit!’ ‘Oh don’t worry we can open the back of it and put a panel in the back and have a zip!’ ‘Really? You can? Okay.’ Michelle Benassi was just brilliant for that.

Suterwalla: So you would be, not the person on the stall, this would be like –

Mazelle: No, this would be like this girl with me. I started to meet different people and Michelle Benassi was part of the whole Soul II Soul kind of thing. She moved into the whole Soul II Soul thing, but I kind of met her before.

Suterwalla: Was she into –

Mazelle: She was into fashion. She ended up being a designer and she would take me to find the Indian pieces, you know? Like the pieces with all the mirrors on it. All the different colours and tie-dyes. Silks and all these like funky 0:17:35 out of this world kind of stuff. Because I never saw stuff like this.

Suterwalla: Right. Okay so you mean stuff from all over the place, around the world, different fabrics and textiles?

Mazelle: I really didn’t. I was sort of like a – people like watching Dynasty and wanted to dress like that. You know? Then I came over here, you know? Because –

Suterwalla: So you would go to Camden Market with her and you would kind of just make it all up?

Mazelle: I did make it all up. We would make it all up. We would go from market to market actually. We would go to like Portobello Market. Portobello Market and Camden Market was basically our two markets. So we just kind of invented –

Suterwalla: Did you customise them yourself, or did you get Michelle or somebody else to do it? Would you ever take something – how much creative control did you have over your own – would you say ‘No, those earrings, that belt?’

Mazelle: Yes, I would do that. I definitely would put it together myself, because I had to wear it. So I just in – created it and just go like – make it work. ‘That

doesn't look right.' You know? I put like suspenders – what do you call braces?

Suterwalla: Yes. Suspenders up here!

Mazelle: Up here. You know, like with a tank top. You know what I mean? Some really leathery shorts or suede and leather mix shorts, bright crazy colours. Throw some really high platforms with it. You know and just – and walk around.

Suterwalla: What were you looking at – your inspiration? Was it magazines? Were there – was there a particular kind of trend that you were following that was inspiring you?

Mazelle: I think everything in front of me sort of inspired me and not so much magazines. It was just the hands on things, the way they had sort of ad hoc, put things in front of you. This and that, and just did sort of personal things at the time there was another market in the King's Road. The King's Road was amazing. They had also they had a market on Kensington High Street. That place was amazing. It was a company called Boy at the time. They made a lot of really, really kind of I guess early gothic kind of stuff. Boy George used to wear gothic stuff from Kensington Market all the time. He turned me on to it... Because you know, we were all in the same kind of clique and at the same kind of places. You know? Like the raves, the early raves which were illegal: they would be on open fields. People would just come dressed in the most bizarre, but amazing things. You know what I mean? I just thought after a while it just – this amalgamation of fashion and uncalmed hair. Just became kind of fashionable if you know what I mean. Because it was so away from the really – like in America when I went to the record companies you had to really be packaged and slick.

Suterwalla: Right. Like mainstream? Commercial?

Mazelle: You know what I mean? You had to be – because then it was just like, really like an R&B sound, they didn't really know what they wanted people to look like, I guess. Coming out of that was Whitney, which, well you know how she was marketed.

Suterwalla: Very glossy, I mean –

Mazelle: Very glossy, very glossy. So you know, they kind of look at you in your raw state and wonder, how can you look like that! I must have looked like, 'No, not ever.'

Suterwalla: Which leads me really to trying to understand if for you there was a politics to your dress. So raw, your words 'raw'. Not glossy, not manufactured.

Mazelle: Not glossy, not manufactured. Rough at the edges.

Suterwalla: Can you start to tell me a little bit about how much of this was about black politics if anything? If any of it? You mention the hair. I think that is kind of really critical to bring in as well. Because talking about the whole body, and including hair. Obviously black hair has been so controversial throughout the black movement from you know, things like the Afro -

Mazelle: Yes, yes.

Suterwalla: Maybe from that then, we can start to talk about Jazzie B and how you as Soul II Soul really became so major and the impact that that had.

Mazelle: The politics of the music industry for black women in America was astonishing and frightening and scary. To put it mildly. You really literally had to fit into a mould. I mean, my thing was that I had already sort of invented or been part of the pioneering of a form of music. So that form of music had a following. So they were a bit kinder with me because they saw the potential of making money anyway. But – and there was a huge but on it – how that – what does this look like? I am not sure it looks like you know, this form of music that is coming up. I am not sure that – you know they tried. They are not as – well what I said, looks and presentation, they want some photo sessions of different creative ideas and convening meetings just on what I could wear and how we are going to do your hair. Number one, the braids must go.

Suterwalla: Right. Too African?

Mazelle: To European straight weave.

Suterwalla: Right that is – wow.

Mazelle: The braids must go away.

Suterwalla: That is interesting. Of course they didn't go?

Mazelle: They didn't go, not for a while. Not for a while, but that was one of the first things, that the braids must go and put something decent on her. What is she wearing and you know it is just a whole kind of – not together. But you know, it ended up working. It ended up working in my favour because I knew that America at that time wasn't going to work for me. So I came over here. I just fitted in perfectly with my braids and my dishevelled whatever. Because it was fresh. It was fresh for people here especially because they didn't really have the braiding shops and all of that. It was just really underground you know. In the communities, it had not been on the big screen and it had not been in magazines. It had not been with the records or anything like that. But it had been in the communities. You know it had been in the communities. So –

Suterwalla: So they were kind of doing it for themselves?

Mazelle: Well you had to do it for yourself. You just really did. It was just that when I came over how far back I am still doing it for myself. You know, I mean like the quality of hair products just kinda like, like stick to your clothes, it was so bad. I remember once I had my daughter's hair braided and she called them Velcro braids because it was – it was bad.

Suterwalla: That's funny.

Mazelle: So hence I would go back to America every six months or every three months. Go and get my hair braided, come back over here, do my work and then just put on all these creative things. You know?

Suterwalla: The women who were kind of creating these looks from within the community, how were they managing that? What kind of things were they going for?

Mazelle: I think a lot of them women looked around—what was around them, because also in the UK we didn't really have black magazines. You didn't have black hair magazines. You know, so there was just like—you couldn't see what you looked like. Everywhere you looked it would be like, blonde hair. Or, you know, that is not my image you know. So they just started for themselves. You want the head-wraps, you know. A lot of things from

Africa. They just sort of put twists on it. You want the head-wraps, you know. A lot of things from Africa. They just sort of put twists on it. Some people in some places you could get like an import of Ebony magazine over here. So they would just take that and do the best they can and could with it. The hair care products in the early '90s and '89 they came from – they were not here yet for black hair. You know, you had Vaseline and this blue hair grease stuff that was just like, 'Are you joking?' It was so thick, I was like, 'You put this in your hair?' You know, I was like 'Okay.' But you still had beautiful women who – like the half caste girls, their hair was naturally long and fine. So you had that or you had dreadlocks. Or you had the head-wraps, you know. We had really bad wigs, synthetic.

Suterwalla: So would you say there was a strong theme of African-ness in the style and influence, that women were using and then making their own? Does that sound right?

Mazelle: Yeah, that's right. It was like – those bad wigs and things must have been so itchy, you know. So a lot of the girls just wore like natural low Afros, or you know you would go out to raves and you started to see the black girls, you know. You would just see them really just kind of dealing with it. Their figures were always incredible. I was like, 'Do they eat over here?' Because America was fat and still is – it is fat. But it was – you know, over here it almost, because the figures, the bodies constructions were so much leaner that hair wasn't a big problem from looking at it. I mean in America you had to – you had to have some good hair because you were fat! Your diet was bad. So I mean maybe they overcompensated in the States with our hair. I don't know if that was the reason why it became more advanced let's say. Because we had advanced ways of doing hair I have noticed, because of – I don't know why. I don't know why but black women in the '60s you know, wore really nice wigs too. They just had more sense of style. I don't know if that came from us being liberated quicker, because the Martin Luther King movement, all that stuff, us having perms. Ida B Wells who invented the perm at 18 something that was when the first straightening column came out of America, you know? So all that stuff wasn't such a big deal here. In America you have to look at sort of the way to get a job too. Over here, when I came over here, I found people with piercings working in my record company. People with dreadlocks working like in the stores and shops. But you would never work in America or get a job with dreadlocks. Ever. In the '80s and '90s? You must be joking. No, you had to have corporate cut hair, corporate style. Business suit, pumps and you know, the

handbag, the briefcase and a college degree. A goal. You had to have a goal orientated mind and a business sense. Over here I found that you didn't have to have that. I don't mean it in a bad way. I mean it like it was more free. You could have your dreadlocks and not be made to have corporate hair.

Suterwalla: It is interesting to me that you have focused so much on black hair, and I'm really fascinated by the differences you mention between America and Britain. From my perspective this is really interesting because when I've been reading about black style, the issue of black hair in terms of black beauty ideals, discussion about black femininity and also in terms of black politics, has come up consistently in my reading. So it's very helpful to hear from you, in terms of your own experience, how important it was. I've been reading black cultural theorists for example who have analysed black hair in terms of black expression -

Mazelle: Yes. Oh yes, it is so important, it is really important to us. And I'm not saying it was less important here I'm just saying in America we'd already been dealing with it you see what I'm saying? Hair has been such a big issue for us? That's why I went back to America for my braids baby, you know?

Suterwalla: So, tell me about Jazzie B and Soul II Soul, I'd like to hear about that, about how the group had an impact on you, and then of course the impact that it had on black British style and hip-hop. Big themes but we can break them down -

Mazelle: Oh my God! Oh my God. Soul II Soul just made a whole new page. When we came out with the funki dreds -

Suterwalla: Oh, yes, I want to come to that, because I want to discuss that in detail, but can you tell me first about how you met Jazzie B so I can get a sense of how things started out?

Mazelle: Jazzie B? I met Jazzie - I was already promoting my first album with EMI. Crazy - I was on a tour, I had just finished selling out Wembley and all these other places with Alexander O'Neal and I was doing some of the real clubs. I was at Dingwalls. Jazzie came up to me, this was after my show was over. He said, 'I want you to come into the studio with me.' He said, 'Why don't you come into the studio with me and blow a tune?' That is what he said. I was like, 'Oh okay.' You know and all these guys with all these dreads, you know these jackets and the 'funkie dreds'. He is just an iconic -

Suterwalla: Okay, so he had the funki dreds then, already, when you met him?

Mazelle: Yeah he had the dreds, and they had the t-shirts because Soul II Soul had already had a fashion label.

Suterwalla: So is this around '89? And he was creating the Soul II Soul branded fashion in Camden? Is that right? So the fashion style had already been established by him?

Mazelle: We are talking 1989.

Suterwalla: Okay so Soul II Soul, the Camden store had already opened, had it?

Mazelle: It was a – it was not open to the public yet. It was like a catalogue shop.

Suterwalla: Right. So was that just for fans and people who knew about him? And he would send them the clothes? So you met him and he had the Soul II Soul t-shirt on...

Mazelle: Yeah, that's it. And I met him and he had the t-shirt, he had the t-shirt on. He had the –

Suterwalla: He had the funki dreds already –

Mazelle: He had the dreds. They were not as long but – . Because that was the other thing. You know you had a lot of Rastafarians, you had the dreadlocks. But when I came here the stereotype of dreadlock, big and really hairy looking and like one – a uni-dread, we used to call them. That is what we called them. In America, they were like beauty dreads they were. They were groomed and oiled and you know, cut down be at a nice size and some of the tips were dyed gold, you know? Or blonde or – you know they were – they had – you had like half-caste brothers with dreads that were really like fine. But like really nice. You know what I mean? Like Maxi Priest, like how his dreads were. So, yes, Jazzie comes up to me at Camden Market – I mean in Camden at Dingwalls. I go back to the studio with him. All this stuff is going on – all this stuff, music everywhere. Nellee Hooper was remixing in one studio. Someone else was remixing 'Ghetto Heaven' in the other studio and I was coming and on the headphone – no on the big speaker was just this backing track of this song. Jazzie said, 'Do you write?' I was

like 'Yeah.' 'So write.' I started writing to this track and two hours later 'Missing You' was born and I was behind the mic singing it.

Suterwalla: No way!

Mazelle: Yes, in two hours. Or less.

Suterwalla: That is amazing.

Mazelle: I had my little dictaphone on the side and that night that is – and I will never forget in my life. I was like 'Ah!' This all came out of it. Everybody was like, 'Oh my God!' Yes they were like – then I can see Ray picking up the phone and calling people from landline phones, we never had a mobile, well we did. Mobiles were about to come out about ten feet tall. I remember them calling LA going like, 'We have got the next single.' I was like, 'Yes, but I am still signed to EMI and I still have to promote my own album.' They were like, 'Don't worry, we will take care of it.' But oh my God, it was – and that is how we met. It was just amazing.

Suterwalla: So you just started working with each other immediately?

Mazelle: Immediately, just like that. We just – it just went crazy. We went on the – we did the world tour. The whole world was waiting to see Soul II Soul. Everywhere we went we were sold out. I mean everywhere we – everywhere – we had seventy-five people on stage with us. If you were on tour with us, we had twenty-five on stage with us. We had good strings. Because we had the string section. Remember, Soul II Soul was the first like black group to have like a lot of string section. The girls were amazing, with the dreds and the flowing dresses. From Ghost I think they might have been. The Ghost dresses and you had the four background singers that just had natural hair. Then you had the dancers. You know, that came from I guess the Africa Centre that always followed Jazzie. You had the dancers and they had dreadlocks and it is just like the lock and the natural Afro and the natural hair. Then you had Caron and Caron had the dreds and her hair tied up.

Suterwalla: Yes, yes. So the style is really apparent. There is very strong and distinct style that the group is developing, and the dreds are there, and the African themes. Right? And the fact that Caron is wearing the dreds.

Mazelle: Like the band tie. Her hair was up to there with the dreds like hanging over and wearing like the long African dashikis. You know? With the kind of like tie-dyes and stuff. It was amazing. At that time my braids were purple, red, gold, blue. Oh my gosh!

Suterwalla: What made you have those colours? Why did you decide to do that? You were still getting it done in America?

Mazelle: No. I found a place – by then I had found a place in London in – Kensington Church Street called Antennas. Antenna did something with mono-fibre hair. Which was some new kind of fibre hair. It was done not by black people but by white people. They were doing extensions. So this is 89/90. A new decade.

Suterwalla: Yes. How important – how much thinking went into how you were dressing at that time. Because you were becoming iconic for black communities everywhere.

Mazelle: Yes.

Suterwalla: I mean was it just here – my focus is here but you know, this is worldwide.

Mazelle: This is true. It was worldwide. I mean people were copying it everywhere.

Suterwalla: Yes they were copying your style. What were you thinking about at that time when you were putting it together? And what did you want to represent through your style, if anything?

Mazelle: The hair, the braids, the dreds. It made – it actually made dreadlocks acceptable in America a bit more. You know, they weren't so scared of the unrelaxed hair. And then we were working with all types of stylists came in. But they were all British. Mostly – yes, they were British stylists. We were getting our shoes made by shoe designers, we were doing like a leather short boot like how All Saints do them now. We had like, they were going on already way back then.

Suterwalla: How much were you involved in these ideas?

Mazelle: Jazzie came up with some of the ideas. I came up with a lot of my own style. I just did. I just always have been able to kind of pull that together.

Just be risqué. You know, me and the girls we would just like go shopping for a day. Pull stuff together and Michelle and her team and a bunch of other people just would randomly say, ‘Okay that works like this. We like that. Let me add this belt or these wool tights to go.’ ‘That looks crazy!’ You know? From the photo sessions, you know, we just – it was on and popping as we say in the States. By that time it was on and popping. When we went to America it was just rammed with Soul II Soul lookalikes. It was just rammed with – you know, all the conscious brothers and sisters and the Afro picks were coming back out. The Afros – and you must understand that there was an explosion of music going on in LA. N.W.A. was out, but Soul II Soul just sort of wiped it all out.

Suterwalla: Yes. yes.

Mazelle: We wiped it all out. I mean really.

Suterwalla: Were you calling yourself hip-hop?

Mazelle: No, we weren’t.

Suterwalla: Were other people calling you hip-hop?

Mazelle: We were just calling ourselves conscious. Conscious lyrics, happy face, a thumping base for another race. An amalgamation of sounds Jazzie would say. We were that – and the thing is Jazzie Being a DJ and having his roots, he knew when to drop a beat on the floor. So he had the heartbeat like – imagine you are a DJ and you are doing a club and you know which song should be the next song and which rhythm should go next to keep the people on the floor dancing. His perspective was sort of worldwide. What should be the next rhythm dropped. Beat on word. And he kind of mixed this with – dropping a song like you can either keep the tempo the same, the tempo upbeat and the people stay on the dance floor and keep dancing, but it has to be something that is moving and grooving them. Or you could drop it all the way down to a slow tune if you want to change their mood and you know, you want to take the break. You know, or whatever.

It is almost like his perspective was looking at world music almost. Because the beat he dropped, the soul disco rhythm was a mixture of house music, hip-hop and Barry White. That is what it was. I mean, it was insane and it worked. Even – I remember when we were doing the – I think it was

the Grammys, the Grammy Awards or something and Barry White being there. Just trying to hunt down Jazzie. He was looking for Jazzie to work with him. Because he thought, this is genius. You know, you have amalgamated my sound. Because something in the spirit of people was kindred to that kind of Barry White kind of rhythm thing. When it dropped they already knew it. You know? It is like you already knew it. You didn't know why you were already embracing it. Why it was already your friend. But you didn't know that before but it was just there revived to the next level. To the next generation which would – we'd begin another electronic sound and electronic beats and all that way of mastering. Then having sort of like looks, got the looks and spoken word, brought back again with Jazzie's rap. They love the way Jazzie's voice sounds. I mean his message was uplifting you know, it was encouraging to the black community, especially in America. It was worldwide but in America, because there is a certain – he had that thing about hair and skin colour and if you were black your music normally was R&B. You know? So had crossed over into rock and roll, pop, hip-hop everywhere. It crossed over the colour boundary. So you know.

Suterwalla: It was so – with the clothes themselves, because there was the African identity that was created on stage, was that part of the inspiration? And then there was the bling.

Mazelle: Yes.

Suterwalla: Tell me about the bling.

Mazelle: The bling.

Suterwalla: What did it mean?

Mazelle: The bling was amazing you know. I just like – I was always into all things big and gold and shining. I wanted – do you know, I don't – I just – I liked it. Just that I liked it. I had picked up some of it you know, from – from I guess the hip-hop culture. From like N.W.A. and the big dolphin earrings, from the 'hood and from the ghettos in America. You know you—it just meant that you know you had—you got your things together, you had a little bit of money because you were wearing these earrings. It was like a Cadillac. You know it was kind of like –

Suterwalla: So it was about showing wealth, about showing success? What was it about exactly?

Mazelle: It was about showing a bit of wealth but it was also showing that you could make it, or that you were doing your thing. Because everybody didn't wear the big dolphin earrings it was like the Puerto Rican girls and the black girls in the 'hoods wore the dolphins. The bad girls. You know. Also the bad girls, they had it going on, they had that – they had got the right brother, you know the bad boy, you had the bad boy and his girl wore these kind of earrings. She is tough and she wasn't going to conform to wearing the pearls. All that kind of thing. So that kind of went with it and this guy, Goldie, he used to design a lot of our jewellery for Soul II Soul. He did like a lot of the diamonds and the gold jewellery.

Suterwalla: Goldie as in –

Mazelle: The DJ.

Suterwalla: Really?

Mazelle: Yes he was with us from the beginning.

Suterwalla: He wears all the stuff himself. The knuckledusters and –

Mazelle: Yes he was our designer for jewellery, back in the day. Yes.

Suterwalla: Okay. So there was an element of 'being bad', you say, is that like being more 'street', if you know what I mean? Being out there, out of traditional roles and doing more, being part of a culture that gave women the chance to show new ways of being? Or am I misreading it?

Mazelle: Absolutely, it was fresh and we were doing it for ourselves. You know what I'm saying, the bad girl was also about doing stuff, not just taking it. You know. So it is about being visible... about showing that you have got the money – you have got the power because you have got the money. You've made it.

Suterwalla: You've made it.

Mazelle: You made it against all odds really. It's saying we've arrived.

Suterwalla: Right.

Mazelle: It wasn't just that you made it to show off. Because you made it against the odds saying that you wouldn't. That you couldn't and that you couldn't have it. That your natural hair is not accepted in broad society and that you need to alter yourself to fit into our mould.

Suterwalla: So the more bling you have is about more power. It is about –

Mazelle: Yes just like the bigger Afro, the bigger, the longer dreads.

Suterwalla: Yes. Did it matter whether the bling was real or not? But of course the more money you get I mean –

Mazelle: It wasn't even about it. Being so real – you hadn't even got into the –

Suterwalla: It didn't matter.

Mazelle: It didn't matter.

Suterwalla: Right so it is almost like the surface matters, it is not the content?

Mazelle: Yes. It wasn't about you know, like it is right now. It is crazy, I am wearing 200 million around my neck. It was about the show, it was all about what it showed, you know. Not real. Bling. It was about the visibility because it was about feeling and showing that you had it, or that this was your version of it.

Suterwalla: Right. What do you mean, like having wealth?

Mazelle: You know. It was just because if you had the money for it to be seen, if you had the life where your records are playing on a radio all the time, you had made it, you didn't need, you know, it didn't matter if it was real or not, the jewellery. Because you had made – what you had made was – you crossed the barrier of being broadcast. The image being out there you know, and that was enough to start you know, a revolution.

Suterwalla: Was it like that for the fans too? Was it like they were showing it not because they had a record but because their culture was now being seen?

Mazelle: I am drinking tea and eating cookies by the way. In case somebody is picking it up.

Suterwalla: Is that what it was like for hip-hop fans?

Mazelle: Yes, for black women, it was definitely a revolution. I think what was kind of in a way happening was power happening for black women in the UK. You know?

Suterwalla: Talk to me about that.

Mazelle: We were accepted ...you know, for just being naturally ourselves. You know? We didn't have to perm our hair. We didn't have to worry about if your nose was too broad, or whatever. You know we had a sound, we had a movement that accepted us the way we were. It was for us, by us. It was the beginning of merchandising your own kind of clothing and merchandising your own brand in your communities. It was sort of like an extension through music of –

Suterwalla: But it went outside the community, because actually it wasn't as –

Mazelle: Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh definitely. But for –

Suterwalla: I mean when people who came to the store, they must have been anybody and everybody.

Mazelle: They were anybody and everybody. That – more empowered by embracing yourself. A lot of people found an identity in the clothes, in the high-legged pants. You know, the kind of high-legged pants and then those boots and the trainers.

Suterwalla: Can you tell me even more about the actual clothes?

Mazelle: I sold suede and leather Soul II Soul jackets in the store, the tour jackets with the emblem of Soul II Soul on the back, which was a head and the little funki spike dreds. The t-shirts, scarf things in woven with the funki dred emblem. T-rings, shoes, belts, trainers. No low shoes. We did –

Suterwalla: Were they branded trainers? They had Soul II Soul on them or –

Mazelle: Yes, yes, yes. Everything. The t-shirts were the biggest thing, so we had different ways of making the t-shirt. Different ways like a suede or a leather or cotton or – you know it is all about that emblem of that head, that Soul II Soul head.

Suterwalla: Were they expensive?

Mazelle: They were quite expensive. We had wallets and belts, you know accessories and –

Suterwalla: Jazzie was designing all of this?

Mazelle: He was working with Michelle. They have a new range out now. So it was scarfs – like a lot of things that you would pick up in the – see in the market. I guess he was getting a lot of stuff from the Camden Market and just turning it into Soul II Soul fashion. We had the dresses too. The like really like flowing sheer, kind of – they were all in one, kind of like silky dashikis in a way. Based on kind of like that style. Oh my gosh, this is taking me back!

Suterwalla: It was pretty – it was a bit more expensive than the market stuff. So people really, really saved up to come here.

Mazelle: Oh definitely. Definitely. Then they would wear it to the concerts.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Mazelle: Then they wait – when we did the tour we had a fashion show as well. We had the fashion show on stage because we were showing the show on Soul II Soul fashions. So we had to buy stuff for that, we had to buy like a van. We had four lead singers, then Jazzie and. So –

Suterwalla: Where did women – the people – did you feel that black women had found a new voice within themselves through this music and style?

Mazelle: Black women were definitely finding a new voice.

Suterwalla: Right. One of empowerment? I mean would it – would they have expressed it as empowerment, or feminism or a black feminism? Or power or –

- Mazelle: I think what was kind of in a way happening was power was happening for black women in the UK. You know? Really because what it did was re-spark what black women had come to know already in the States, like in the '70s and the '80s from your Angela Davis, from your Tony Morrisons, from your Oprah Winfreys, because we kind of had those kind of role models. The UK didn't.
- Suterwalla: Then Soul II Soul came along.
- Mazelle: Then Soul II Soul came along and then suddenly the kids here, the young black kids who had really been you know, isolated, you know? Because you may have had black women in certain positions in the UK but you never heard about them, you never saw them. They were here for sure!
- Suterwalla: Yes, yes.
- Mazelle: So you would look at them. Do you know what I mean? Know in a sense that this world is kind of like that. So I think that Soul II Soul really did – but music definitely revolutionised black youth culture and black identity in the black community for young black women and men really. It just kind of gave them the spark that they could do whatever they wanted to do and have style. You know? Make music.
- Suterwalla: Yes, that is the other thing. Because suddenly, I mean in the way that punk gave women a chance to make music, but you didn't have to know how to play a guitar, so actually anyone could do it. Did you feel that was the case with the hip-hop scene? I mean was it that it opened up new opportunities, new identities?
- Mazelle: It really did, but at the same time, it still put a limit on women. Because now the male DJ was emerging and he wanted to still hold the female artist down. So it had to be featuring her. So and so featuring with the DJ. 'Featuring'. You know. You know, stuff like that. It was – you would have to come under a male DJ to bring you on board.
- Suterwalla: Did you feel that with Jazzie B? So there was this kind of ceiling, were it quite sexist in a way, from the music industry and then from black men too?
- Mazelle: There was a ceiling.

Suterwalla: Could you explain this to me?

Mazelle: Yes, you know, there was some movement. Yes. But you know...I saw a lot of them [girls] be left behind because of the politics.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Mazelle: Really brilliant artists, female, girls, really, really good writers. I saw a lot of them, yes. But then that was the time, you know, that's not to say that it didn't give women new chances because it did. Don't get me wrong, it was just the time, but we had the time to also do new things. It was amazing, it was a revolution for black women, you can't forget that.

Suterwalla: In terms of the dress – I am focusing more on hip-hop now. I mean, now if you are looking at kind of the contemporary argument about hip-hop it is about the sexualisation of women in hip-hop and how they just turned black women's bodies into this kind of quite a sexualised thing.

Mazelle: It was always on its way there. It was on its way there. Because like –

Suterwalla: Were women deliberately setting out to be very sexual in the way they were dressing?

Mazelle: It was always on its way there. I am just looking back at 'Push It' with Salt-N-Pepper and the DJ.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Mazelle: But it was a bit – it was always there. Because you had a really short shorts and all that. You know, you had the big leather jackets and the really small tank tops and the big dolphin earrings and the grinding. Grinding and legs open wide, kind of like – you know?

Suterwalla: That was coming – would you say that was –

Mazelle: I would say that was in '89. It was coming from the neighbourhoods. It is coming from kind of like a 'hood thing. Because you want to get that kind of prestige as a girl that is down. (Sings) 'I want to be down, look what you're going through'.

Suterwalla: I can't believe I am hearing you sing that! Face-to-face!

Mazelle: Yeah there was a thing about wearing it and showing it. You know this empowerment thing. You were owning it now.

Suterwalla: So, I'm just trying to understand, was it something like in hip-hop, could you be saying 'I am sexual and I am going to wave it in your face'. But now it was about owning the respect as well?

Mazelle: That is going to give me my respect because I am going to wave it in your face and I might not necessarily be going to give it to you. This is what the woman is thinking. But it is not what the image is portraying. It comes from like, you know, the clubs, the dance clubs in the early days, in the States. You know the late hour clubs. You know there was a lot of the bumping and grinding going on in there and it is just – that is – and actually that is where the word 'hip-hop' comes from.

Suterwalla: Oh right. I don't know about this. Could you tell me more?

Mazelle: It comes from shaking your ass and hips.

Suterwalla: So it is directly linked to that bump and grind stuff?

Mazelle: It is directly linked. Directly linked. It was about being sexual, but in a new way. Owning it, you know. Saying you could own it and do what you want with it.

Suterwalla: So women deliberately kind of took on that – that path of – was a deliberate thing that women were doing with their dress?

Mazelle: There was a lot of sexual stuff in the music anyway. It carried on to dress you know. But it was great for women to show that black confidence.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Mazelle: It is just raw you know.

Suterwalla: I mean did you feel that women should – you talked about beads and you talked about sexualisation. Was there a new way that black women were expressing identity through showing off the black body? Because –

Mazelle: Yes I would –

Suterwalla: Can you describe this? And is this something they might have seen as empowering?

Mazelle: Yes, the women, they did see it as empowering and that they had made it that far. I am going to go up into like – okay so it was different for some women, well Caron Wheeler. Because Caron Wheeler, she was a very strong woman and she didn't have to you know, show it. Because she will sing it. You know. With the braids and the head-dress you know, it was almost empress. You know? Then you had Erykah Badu who came after that, to the left of that with the same empress. She wore long dresses, fitting, you know, to show her womanhood, but not overt. You know what I mean? But there was a lot of sexual stuff going on. Then Jill Scott, with the Afro that – and you know just conscious lyrics. That was a whole different – another side of hip-hop. It was the singing side. You know the rapping side was really, really more hard-core and it was just about bringing it and shaking your arse. I am saying 'But don't touch it.' Okay. 'You can look but you don't touch it.' 'Don't touch it or else you are in a coffin.' (Laughter)

Suterwalla: So was that about kind of making themselves visible? Did they feel quite invisible?

Mazelle: Yes, I would say yes. It is about making themselves visible. Really was. Just telling young girls that 'Look, you don't have to be embarrassed about your body. You know, you can use your body to empower as a tool for empowerment.'

Suterwalla: Right. But it is still within the kind of the gender politics, sort of thing?

Mazelle: Yes, still within the gender politics of the time, within the context of the sexism that existed more generally and in black culture and in the music industry? But that didn't mean that this wasn't important, the fact that black women were showing their bodies and owning their bodies. Obviously it wasn't for everyone but it was important. It was important for turning the tide. It was new. It was important.

Suterwalla: That was so interesting and really so helpful. You have given me so much material and loads to go and think about as well.

Mazelle:

Ah bless you. Thank you so much.

[Interview diverts to talk about when the thesis will be finished and I ask Mazelle whether she has clothes or photographs that she would share with me. I also ask her to recommend other women to interview. This part of the transcript has not been included here].

End

## Debbie Pryce

Interview date: 3 December 2011.

Location: pub and restaurant, Clapham, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 20 minutes.

Start

Suterwalla: Yes. Wherever you're comfortable. And that orange light needs to be on for the recording, so as long as it's on it's fine, and when it goes off I might have to start another file.

Pryce: Oh right. So basically it's like I'm in control of it. I mean, it stays close to me.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: Okay. Hi.

Suterwalla: Okay. Well, thank you again so much.

Pryce: My pleasure. I'll always make time for these things. Anyone who asks me to do stuff. Especially when a lot of people are doing stuff when it's educational-wise and people are doing dissertations and all that stuff. I love it.

Suterwalla: You know what I've found? It's that there's not much archival material about the British hip-hop scene.

Pryce: I know. And it exists. The thing is that it's there and I've spoken to so many people who were, you know, writing books or doing something or putting a documentary together. It's like they make a start and it's like they never follow it through, you know? And I regret not taking up that task myself, because there's so much. But I think people will always be interested.

Suterwalla: It's a really fascinating time, I think, and the '80s in terms of what was happening for women generally as well – the feminism movement that was coming out of the '70s, the way that punk created a new stage and a new platform for women I think, in my opinion, is all worth looking at in terms

of the way all these different music and cultural movements evolved, and what it meant for women.

Pryce: The era. Yes. And you're right to look at it all together.

Suterwalla: So, I'm interested- I mean, I've got loads I'd like to talk about.

Pryce: Absolutely. Fire away.

Suterwalla: So maybe if we can break through. But I'm interested, first of all, if maybe if you could talk to me about what it was like being a black girl and then woman growing up in Britain, and how you got into hip-hop. In particular, as I mentioned to you I'm really interested in the perspectives of women, in a gendered perspective.

Pryce: Yes. Gosh. Where do I start with that? I think, you know, when we first got into hip-hop, I always say like hip-hop found us and it's like it was- we were sitting waiting- I mean, we've always been into music. We grew up listening to music in our house. Our parents had- You know, we listened to soul; we listened to reggae; we listened to jazz funk.

Suterwalla: What's your background?

Pryce: I'm Jamaican. Both of my parents are Jamaican.

Suterwalla: Right. But you were born here?

Pryce: Yes. 1967. And Susan the other group member lived on a road around the corner, literally, I lived on one road, she lived on the next road. We both went to the same nursery as kids. Then we went to the same primary school. The only time we ever split in our lives was when we went to secondary school and – yes, secondary school and college – but it was during our college years that hip-hop kind of came into our lives and it was literally during my college years that I wrote most of the lyrics that were on the album.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: Anything that appeared on the album that we wrote together, I done it- I was training to be a chef. So instead of me writing our recipes and stuff, I was writing lyrics.

Suterwalla: Now, how did you already know about hip-hop? Because this is very early, and I wouldn't have thought hip-hop was around yet?

Pryce: We knew about- Yes. We knew about hip-hop, I think it would have been from *The Message*. Remember *The Message*? Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

Suterwalla: Yes of course, so you had heard that?

Pryce: So it was that period, but I have- I have reason to believe that we were aware of hip-hop, and probably we didn't know it was called, you know officially called hip-hop back then, but prior to that- because I went to New York. The first time I went to New York was in 1979.

Suterwalla: Yes. Okay.

Pryce: 1979. So that's when I was exposed to, like, good-quality soul music.

Suterwalla: So did you got to the Bronx? Did you actually hear it at block parties?

Pryce: Yes. Yes, exactly. My family lived in the Bronx so the first time I went to New York I went to the Bronx and it was an era of Chic and the early Michael Jackson stuff and it was stuff we were hearing in England but we never had-

Suterwalla: There must have been the disco crossover as well, wasn't there? That's what I've been reading.

Pryce: Oh yes. There was. I loved that. But, to me, it wasn't until later years that we found out it was called disco. To us it was soul music or it was funk. You know? That's what we were raised to believe in this country but then that whole thing about the disco era and how the US kind of like threw the whole disco thing out and it kind of crashed. But, yes, we discovered- we discovered hip-hop very early before any kind of commercialism came into play and that would have been '79- I was only little. I was about 12 or 13 when I went to New York.

Suterwalla: Okay. Can I just get some detail from you about that? So you go to New York in '79. You go to the Bronx.

Pryce: Yes.

Suterwalla: What's going on there? Because, as an academic, what I read is, there's a heavy focus on block parties.

Pryce: Yes. Absolutely.

Suterwalla: So you go there and, again, from what I've read so I don't know, but was it that because of the high unemployment people, so, a) people have the time, they've managed to get hold of equipment that they're sharing and they're passing around, they're using records from all over the place – James Brown and all that kind of stuff.

Pryce: And they're setting up in the streets and they're- you know, they're having street parties but there were street parties. I mean- How can I describe? I think I went to- And it wasn't like it was I was aware that it was like a hip-hop thing. It was something would be happening on that street where a family had set up or there was food going and music was playing. It could have been somebody's birthday. Who knows?  
But it was after that period-

Suterwalla: And was it with turntables, was it with DJs?

Pryce: Yes. And it was just a matter of people enjoying and having entertainment outside of the house. So I think it must have been from there that street parties kind of expanded but I know a lot of it started within the community, like with the Bronx- the Bronx River Project and certain youth clubs. I think that's where it all kind of spanned from. Because instead of, like, going around making trouble, what did guys do or what did the community do? Get together, play music, people were breakdancing, people were emceeing. So it's like when I came back from New York in '79, it was like the first trip – it was a family trip – I was more open to music and I was always aware of music, and me and Susan, we grew up listening to music. We went to youth clubs, we went to church and everything in our lives was based around what our parents had, what music they had, and it was always up to date. We'd listen to-

Suterwalla: And I guess they were listening to other types of black music? Where were the influences coming from?

Pryce: Well, yes – they did. Yes, they did. They listened to reggae. They listened to reggae and soul. Susan’s dad was- he was a soul man. My household was more reggae. Her household was more soul, so we had that mix.

Suterwalla: Would they go to, like, shebeens and stuff or-

Pryce: I would imagine, in the old days, yes – they used to go to their, you know, the parties. When the West Indians came over-

Suterwalla: Okay. So what I’m trying to understand is to what extent the music history here for black communities was about being diaspora in Britain, and drawing from those influences. And whether British hip-hop was different to the US because of this?

Pryce: Oh yeah, totally. I mean the way they got together, you know our parents and when we were younger and to celebrate their togetherness. Yes. They had parties and they had all their own music and stuff. We used to have parties in our house. I mean, we were kids. You know? You get sent to bed or you go to an aunt’s or you go to a family’s house, so there is always that energy of, you know, families coming together and music being, like, a very important part of that. It was- everything revolved around music. And we grew up— I must say, we did grow up listening to music, so when it got to—When did I go to college? That might have been ’82, ’83, when—I think that’s when *The Message* came—I can’t remember exactly the year, but it was that record I think that triggered us. And also *White Lines*.

Suterwalla: And did you hear it on the radio? I mean, how did you hear it? Because it wouldn’t have been on the mainstream...

Pryce: I know. That’s the thing. It wasn’t mainstream. But we used to listen to—there were pirate radio stations back in those days. There weren’t as many as there are today but we used to listen to Soul R Radio-

Suterwalla: Would it have been on like Kiss and-

Pryce: Kiss wasn’t around then.

Suterwalla: No.

Pryce: No. Kiss wasn't around. I tell you what we used to listen to religiously was Reggae in the Woods and Lyceum on a Friday night, which was broadcasted live and I think that one went out on Capital Radio, and then we'd listen to him on Sunday. So we had, like, Friday, Saturday, Sunday radio listening, and there was about- there were three radio stations, and those shows must have been like an hour max, but that's where we got our education. That's where we felt- Because we weren't old enough to go parties. The only time we started going out was when we were about 17. Our first proper rave was Breakers Yard, which is up in Vauxhall.

Suterwalla: Breakers Yard. And what was that? Like a rave just put together?

Pryce: It was a hip-hop jam which was brought together by- there were a collection of guys- it was like a sound system but they were rappers as well. They were called the Capital Boys. So they put on this club night at- it was called a 'podium' back in those days, at Vauxhall. And the night was called Breakers Yard. So that's where all the breakers used to meet up and go and do their thing and all the rappers, and it was very South London kind of- Everybody who went- I know people travelled from different parts of London but there was a very strong South London kind of-

Suterwalla: Ah, it's interesting that you mention how local, what a local vibe it had. So was that important, the local element of it? Was it based in local communities?

Pryce: Yes. We were just coming from- yes, it was fresh because we knew that the music we were listening to in the UK, we were listening to new stuff. And of course there was American music. That's what- that's all we had. That's all that we loved. So actually going into the territory for me, going to New York and hearing their radio stations, and just hearing those records on rotation constantly and then coming back to the UK and the UK was so behind. So that's what- that's where I think our whole- well, particularly mine, my whole connections going back and forth to New York, particularly to get music and to tape radio stations and bring back cassette tapes just to-

Suterwalla: Oh you recorded radio stations? And then played them at home?

Pryce: Yes. I used to do that all the time. Come back from America with cassette tapes, tape shows...take them back and we'd all sit around or I'd hand them out to people. And- But that's how we got music, because we weren't—We wouldn't go to record shops to buy records. We didn't know anything about buying records. We didn't know anything about buying records. So, everything was radio-based for us and we- it was very, very, very limited and then we'd make it our own, you know we'd make it ours.

But, yes. I mean, going there in '79, I sensed the whole upliftment of music and what it meant and I felt like I was there and it was organic, more importantly. The whole thing was organic. Yes, it was very soul-disco but hip-hop was incorporated in that and it was only for a couple of years- well, '79, '81, '82. Maybe three or four years after that was when we embraced and had the knowledge of what hip-hop was. You know? I'm at college, studying to be a chef. And so that was a period when we were really probably going out to clubs and there was a scene developing in the UK and, you know, the whole breaking scene kind of happened and we were hanging out in all the cool spots. Like, all the breakers would hang out at Covent Garden, Leicester Square.

Suterwalla: Clubs?

Pryce: Yes. There were clubs. There were clubs but also the breakers used to just hang out on the streets. It was really local, you know we brought our own local spirit to it.

Suterwalla: Right. Yes.

Pryce: We had a spot in Clapham Junction where our local guys, guys whom we grew up with and went to school with who became breakers and poppers and rappers, we all used to hang out around Clapham Junction.

Suterwalla: So did you feel this was your own British thing, I mean did you feel you were copying the States or was this a British music genre you were making, if that makes sense?

Pryce: Oh no it was ours! I mean we just used to set up a lino at the station and we'd own it. Wherever we could find a spot, we'd roll out the lino, the guys would do their thing and we're standing at the edge, just like- you know we were making it.

Suterwalla: I'm interested in the creative aspect, this sense of 'owning it', 'making it'. Can you talk more about this?

Pryce: First we started off with cardboard and then we used to see videos and footage of, like, American stuff and they were using lino. So the guys went and bought their lino but we'd do it how we wanted to. We- oh, it was such an amazing time. It really was. We just had this little thing going on and it was like- it was all very Clapham Junction-based, so all of us were from Battersea, Clapham anyway, and we all went to the same primary school and I don't know how we all met but, yes, we just used to hang out and then we'd expand into the West End because there were- we were hearing about crews that were in like North London and East London and West London and the meeting point was central, so-

Suterwalla: Were you self-identifying as a hip-hop group?

Pryce: Absolutely.

Suterwalla: Did you think of yourselves as a crew? How did you know that word?

Pryce: I don't know. You're asking me questions that I haven't really thought about! But originally we were called the Warm Milk and the Cookie Crew. It wasn't just Cookie Crew. And there used to be thirteen members in the crew. We didn't- the other girls didn't necessarily do anything. We just- when we used to go out we went out clubbing. If we just went out hanging out, there'd be thirteen girls strong. And we'd start off at Clapham South. We'd be getting on a tube to go somewhere into the West End. But when we got into the music quite heavily – and even back then we were very aware of who we were, how we carried ourselves, how we dressed and how, you know, the person on the outside would look at us and, you know, when we were younger, you know, we used to wear like skirts and little vest tops. We had these- I remember one time there were thirteen of us and we went and bought all these little tops that had- it had something on there but that's when we became a crew – when there were thirteen of us. It wasn't necessarily just the two of us. Because initially thirteen, and then me and Susie started getting into the music quite strong and really taking- taking it seriously, what we were doing, and just eventually the girls just kind of dropped out and, you know, were doing other things in life, but we kind of stuck at it. And then it was the Warm Milk and Cookie Crew and then we had to shorten it to the Cookie Crew.

Suterwalla: Who came up with that?

Pryce: We did. Me and Susie did. It was just something- I think it was- It was a whole kind of like, well in that case it was an American influence and I remember at some point we used to- you know, when you're young, you go around and you talk with that fake American accent and you're just joking with each other and we always knew that- and Americans always said, you know, we're going to have some warm milk and cookies, so it was just something we just said off our tongue. And one day we just said, 'Why don't we just call ourselves the Warm Milk and Cookie Crew?' So then we had that name and when we were first gigging and doing stuff, we were billed as the Warm Milk and Cookie Crew, and people just assumed that I was the warm milk because I was the lighter complexion, and Susie was the cookie because she had- her freckles were quite prominent. But we taught them straight, that that wasn't the case. We were just called the Warm Milk and Cookie Crew and then it just got shortened because as we started hanging out and, you know, we were hanging out with the B-boys and stuff, it just got shortened because it was two of us and then it got to a point where they were just calling us Cookies. But when- if they were calling me, there was a certain tone. We always knew which one of us they were calling. Even if we were standing next to each other and somebody was having a conversation and it was directed to one of us, we knew who they were talking to. But the whole thing that did bring us together was the whole concept of hip-hop and, you know, and when we started to be embraced by the scene-

Suterwalla: Was Susie going to America as well and was she getting all that influence as well?

Pryce: No, no, no. Not at that time. The only time we went to America was- We went on holiday, I think it was 1980- was it 1984? It might have been 1986, probably. 1986. Between 1985, 1986, we went on holiday together. And then after 1998, there were some times when she'd travelled back and forth from work, and since we disbanded she's not been to New York since. She's probably not been back for 20 years.

Suterwalla: So you had real kind of live exposure to that music compared to her.

Pryce: Oh, absolutely. Because I was there every year. You know? My family lived there. My sister moved there, so when I went it was the annual holiday but it was handy because I was going on holidays for four to six weeks, but I was also going there to discover things and to, you know, to shop, to get the latest hip-hop outfits, and also for people to give me shopping lists, to buy records. So I would be travelling all over New York, going to Brooklyn, going downtown and going to all of these particular record shops to dig out white labels, basically, to bring back some DJs. White labels. Basically, when DJs find the breakbeat that they cut up, sometimes they don't like to let other DJs know what that break is. So, the thing is, I don't know if you remember or if you look at any old footage, what DJs used to do was to scrub out the label and put like a white label over it. That way no one could identify the record they were playing. So if I were a hot DJ that got everything, you know, got all the latest breaks or some breaks that you can't get hold of, I wouldn't want you as another DJ to see what it was, because you'd go out and buy that record. Or two records.

Suterwalla: I'm really interested in the idea of the 'break' in hip-hop, not just with the music though. I'm exploring whether that idea was about the whole culture, you know whether you can think about the importance of the hip-hop break even in the style and dress. I'm still thinking about this but -

Pryce: The break-

Suterwalla: Yeah, the idea of the breakbeat, but also the idea that the break was a way, that that was how new things got created. I don't know if you'll agree with this but the idea that the break was also about breaking away from stereotypes and doing something new.

Pryce: Oh yeah, oh I see yeah, that's good. Yeah I mean you had to find the breakbeat, so a breakbeat is a-

Suterwalla: You think, right, stop it there and bring the beat down and-

Pryce: Yes. There might be a certain part in a record that you like that you will take that, a certain bit, from both records, and that's where they cut back and forth. That's called a break bit. It could be any bit in the record. Absolutely in any bit. Buy yeah I think it was breaking through too, you know, yeah -

Suterwalla: It was obviously critical to the music style?

Pryce: So, when DJs found a record- I mean, for instance, like some of the Public Enemy records and some of the breaks that they had on their album, people couldn't track them down because they didn't know what they were. But, after a while, people became savvy to it and you realised that they were- breakbeats were records from like the '60s and '70s. They were old records, you know? And it was just finding a certain bit on anything.  
The majority of modern music now, you listen to it, it's old beats.

Suterwalla: Yes, the legacy, but we'll come to that.

Pryce: Yes, yes.

Suterwalla: I'm really interested the creative aspect of all of this. In the way that you were doing it or making it for yourself.

Pryce: Look for white labels or look for, sometimes-

Suterwalla: But if- say that's the scrubbed-out bit?

Pryce: Yes, but sometimes- No. I would buy the record but when I got it back to whoever ordered the records, they would make sure they'd scrub it out and put a white label on it.

Suterwalla: Yes, yes, yes.

Pryce: So you couldn't see the title or the artist or whatever. But sometimes I didn't know the full title of a record, so I used to go to New York with a shopping- literally a shopping list and go to a Sid record shop in Brooklyn that was well known for getting old records and I'd give it to the man at the counter and say, look, I'm looking for these. And they'd know exactly what I'm talking about, even if there's one word in the title, they knew, because that's what hip-hop was all about. It was a knowledge thing and, you know, things that were abbreviated. It wasn't- this is it. And you had to search it out. Everything had to be sourced and searched out. And we had those record shops in Soho as well, so DJs over here, they would go to certain second-hand record shops in Soho and buy their old town records and find breakbeats on them.

Suterwalla: So, knowledge was important, insider-knowledge, you really had to know your music to get it.

Pryce: Oh, absolutely. Yes. We were- yes.

Suterwalla: I mean it wasn't for- it wasn't- Because If you think about punk, for example, which must have been around the same time as this.

Pryce: Yes.

Suterwalla: You didn't know- there's lots been said about the fact that you didn't need to know how to play an instrument. You didn't know how- you know, it wasn't about knowing how to sing. It was just about getting up and doing it-

Pryce: Yes. And, to be honest, I cannot work out the knowledge that we had back in those days and what we discovered and what we had to search out, how we actually got it. You know? But that was the spirit of it. You just felt that you were gonna do all this stuff. That was hip-hop, it made you able, you felt that you could, you know, we just did it. It was amazing.

Suterwalla: Yes. You must have really had to live it 24/7 to have that knowledge?

Pryce: Yes. We didn't have internet. We didn't have mobile phones. Yes. Anything like going out or going to a club or - you hear a new record but it's not like we heard it on the official playlist or anything. We just went to clubs and we went to hip-hop jams. We did it for ourselves you know I think that's really important. A lot of jams were- they weren't in fancy club nights; they were- they might have been a community hall, a church hall. Just like a place. And a lot of these events we used to go to, or even before that-

Suterwalla: And so you were listening very actively to the music.

Pryce: Oh, because we knew everything. We knew titles-

Suterwalla: And you were trying to identify, oh right – that's from that, that's from that.

Pryce: Oh, completely. And we'd- I don't know. As if by magic, we'd know what it was. And, if we didn't know, we would discover, we would find out, because that was the whole purpose of being into hip-hop, because it wasn't

given to us on a plate. We had to search it out. And it was- it was the most amazing time for music, as far as I'm concerned.

Suterwalla: Yes...

Pryce: And, you know, saying that, we grew up listening to music so we were aware of what it entailed, but when it came to hip-hop it was so new, it wasn't brought to us in the mainstream anymore; it just- it came through and Chic, it came through Grandmaster Flash; it came through- we didn't even have access to even videos. No. So we relied on, you know, becoming knowledgeable I mean really making it and doing it or sometimes DJs who had radio shows, they'd go and hang out and, you know, get to know the scene, get to know the people and come back and report on their shows. So that's how we were educated. And it was such a small entity but- I don't know. It was a beautiful time.

Suterwalla: Right. A couple of things that the scholarship on hip-hop talks about is, first the emphasis on racial authenticity.

Pryce: Okay.

Suterwalla: So associating it with being black.

Pryce: Black. Yes.

Suterwalla: And the second thing is being actually quite misogynistic and very much anti-woman and objectifying women as part of the structure. Can move on to talk about these issues?

Pryce: Yes. Yes, but is that- yes. I think in the old days- I mean, just like now, it is- Yes, it is predominantly male but I've been asked this question for, like, over twenty years and just the other day I did an interview with someone and they asked the same question and every time people ask me that, when I think back to how we were as women, we were strong women naturally, and we knew when we got into that scene it was very male-dominated, and we were very passionate about our music.

We were passionate about who we were; we were passionate about image. And it wasn't something that we sat down and said we were going to be like this. It was almost like it was just in our DNA. So, yes, we came up against

all that ‘Oh, you’re girls in a rap’ and this, that and the other but we always brushed it off because it meant nothing to us. At the end of the day, if you’re an artist, whether you’re in a crew or you’re an individual, if you’re good you’re good at what you do, not because you’re a woman. So it was always an unfair statement but any time any journalist or any media ask us, it never affected us in any way. If anything, we were very much embraced by the whole male dominancy of it because we were at such a standard, and because we carried ourselves in a manner where we commanded respect.

You know? When we went on stage, we wouldn’t be caught dead in a— what do you call it? A skirt or showing a bit of arse. Are you mad? No. We were wearing the jeans; we were wearing the Lee jeans, our name belts, sneakers and basically we were dressed like the guys. So if someone’s like- you know, we were kind of on the same level. Sometimes we were- probably appeared cooler because we’d got the gear, and because of my journeys back and forth and because we used to travel a lot, we always bought the latest stuff. So, no, we never had that. It always tried to come on to our table, but it never affected who we were. It didn’t affect our career in any way, and our policy was anyhow that we did, and this actually came from a- God, who’s the guy who we worked with? Edwin Starr whom we worked with, he said to us that his policy, no matter where you are on a bill is what we adopted and what we always did, no matter if we were first on the bill and there were two people in the audience. We’d open and close every performance that way. So we could be supporting Diana Ross. Our policy was to go up and do our best and to make sure we came off and do our best. And we always did, so that whole thing about ‘you’re women in hip-hop’, yes, we’re women and we’re hip-hop.

Suterwalla: You didn’t feel objectified?

Pryce: No. We didn’t feel- even when, you know, the lyrical content of rap started to change in America when it became very, you know, putting down women and the whole slut thing and – so that came very strong, but it never affected us because it wasn’t what we were about, and I know there was a point- in the early days it was all about partying and having a good time. It was all about hip-hop. It was all about who’s got the dopest crew; who’s got the freshest gear on, who’s got the best records. Putting down women? That was never- we didn’t even know that. How would we know about those kind of things? You know? It wasn’t on our forethought. So when hip-hop started to change – I can’t remember what year that was but, you know,

when the whole N.W.A. thing came and it became very political and the Public Enemies and whatever and, you know, the UK scene kind of changed with their lyrical content. People kind of got quite radical and things, but when that stuff was happening and, you know, when you get asked a question, 'don't you feel offended that this person said that in their rap and they're putting women down?' I'm like, yes, they're doing that because probably it relates- they're relating to something in their life or in their environment and it's not part of our landscape, so I don't feel offended. If it were directed at me and I were that woman, maybe I would, but nothing- if they want to talk about women and women want to go and be in videos with their things out and everything, that is completely up to them but to this day we still get respect for who we were and what we stood for and how we dressed and how we carried ourselves, and particularly what our lyrical content was, so-

Suterwalla: What about being black? What did race- what role did race play in it? And what about being black and British? So the diasporic element of your experience?

Pryce: What? Being black and being hip-hop?

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: That was- That was-

Suterwalla: What did it mean in terms of British black identity?

Pryce: Back in those days we had- there were a handful of, like, you know, white guys or white girls who were hanging out who were part of the scene. At no point do I even remember that there was any kind of racial tension. It just wasn't- everyone was just so young and fresh and passionate about music in the scene.

Suterwalla: Was the scene not associated with black expression?

Pryce: Yes. It was associated with black expression, but-

Suterwalla: And black politics.

Pryce: Mostly in America it was very political. Remember, in the early days in the UK it was about fun and having a good time and it was different because we were in the UK, you know we didn't have the same issues as America. You know that wasn't our stuff. I mean we had our own stuff that was British, you know, so for us, and I mean we had so many different music influences here. For us it wasn't about 'you're white and you can't be in our crew'. That wasn't it at all. Everybody is accepted. I mean, in America it was probably harder and it wasn't until obviously years later that the white community started to get- in fact, white people would always listen to hip-hop and, you know, the whole statistics show that young white females and white males are the biggest buyers of hip-hop music. But for us, I mean I think we are much more multicultural here, and we just didn't have the same issues. So white people were there. But, no, everybody was embraced. From our period there was no racial tension. It just wasn't on our agenda. That's what I think anyway.

Suterwalla: Okay. Can we talk also about whether there was a political element to it for you in that, well, would you have classified it, in the '80s, as a subcultural music? And was it picking up on any ideas of hip-hop as resistance?

Pryce: Yeah it kind of did, you know especially in the latter years because, like I said, it became very political and everybody became suddenly became quite radical, and then that whole tension-

Suterwalla: When would you identify that?

Pryce: That would have been the late '80s, I think. Late '80s. No, no. Early '90s. When it became news. You know? They were talking about it on the news, because people were stealing VWs off cars or something kicked off in a club night or Public Enemy came and there was a fight in the venue. That's when it started, and that's when hip-hop started to get bad press, and that's when venues and certain media like started to-

Suterwalla: Demonise it?

Pryce: Yes. Because it was something to write about. I don't think- Unless- Sometimes when I see journalists, they have to have a story and if something's kicking off, you want to be the first to report it and you want to be the first to get it in the *Guardian* or the broadsheets or whatever and I don't think- I don't think the way they try to demonise it and bring it down

and put it down as a bad music and it's, you know, the black community doing this and the white kids are getting into it and following suit, that's all bullshit. I mean, yes, that happens – it's reality – but it hasn't stopped hip-hop progressing. It's a multi-million- multi-billion, global entity. You cannot deny that, regardless of what's happened. The good times, the bad times, and things are always evolving and, you know, it's a bit sad. I think, you know, music's changed. Has it changed for the better? Maybe not. But just like our parents before us, they listened to our music and it was like what are you guys listening to?

Suterwalla: Yes...

Pryce: They grew up on their stuff. They're still passionate about it. I grew up in the '70s, '80s and early '90s. That music is still my first love. Stuff now? I like some of it but I don't have a collection of CDs. You know? I still listen- When I get in my car, I'm still playing Diamond D. I'm still playing old-school stuff, because that's what I enjoy listening to.

Suterwalla: Yes. Really? So that's what you connect with, that's where you identify yourself?

Pryce: Yeah, totally. I don't go out to clubs, so I'm not going to be privy or knowledgeable to what music is hot, and some of the music that is apparently hot, I don't see the quality in it at all. I don't see- I don't know. It's just music. You know? I just think we were around at a beautiful time when hip-hop first emerged in this country and how we embraced it, almost like it was meant to happen because we were always passionate about music and we wanted to be singers, and there was a point when we were kind of like pursuing that angle, I think, but then hip-hop came and it was just like- and we just did it. You know? We wrote a rap and it just happened naturally and then we found a scene and then we found a scene of people and then we just found a whole culture that went with it. You know? And then-it was amazing.

Suterwalla: How did you find a scene?

Pryce: The scene? We used to- well, because we were around here, the scene- how did we find out about it? Because we had no mobile phones; we had no internet. We just knew shit was happening and I remember at one point we started hearing things like, you know, all the breakers were hanging out at

Covent Garden and Covent Garden was a spot and then we started hearing about certain crews and certain breakers. We knew nobody. I'll tell you how it happened, Westwood, actually. Because he used to have a rap show and then we'd put on that rap competition that we won.

Suterwalla: Yes, yes. That's when you got your big break wasn't it?

Pryce: So that was the doors that completely opened to us, because we were- as much as the scene was brand new, we were still fresh on the scene, and we weren't even on the scene. It was just me and Susie and we had our little Battersea crew that was with us – our little support network – and we went to this club and we did this-

Suterwalla: And were they friends from school or-

Pryce: Yes. A bunch of them were friends from school and it was their friends from, like, secondary school, like it was all guys. We just used to hang out with guys. You know? And, yes, so we all grew up in the same area and then when we went down to the club thing, because I think we used to listen to, like on the pirate radio stations, and obviously the guys were probably going out more so they knew about the stuff that was happening in central London, and we didn't feel comfortable trying to get into that environment until we had something to put on the table. So when we won that competition, we were just like- it was just like worldwide news. You know? We were like accepted into the fold and then we started hanging out and we were cool and, but not because we were girls- because we were good at what we did and we were there because we fucking loved hip-hop. It wasn't even funny. We took everything seriously. We would be offended if females came onto the scene but they weren't there for hip-hop; they were there for being girls. You know? We weren't into that at all.

Suterwalla: Like groupies?

Pryce: Yes. Early-day groupies. They were probably harmless. We were young back then but, no matter what, there was always a degree of separation between them and us and the way the guys treated them and the way the guys treated us. You know? So we always had that kind of- that respect. The Cookies are here and when we go and do a show it's like they know they're up against something. So we enjoyed that. And it was- it was a buzz and we made sure we all went in there and we had our polo necks on and our name

belts- because we wanted to make sure, when we come up there we're coming to represent with you guys.

Suterwalla: Yes. So was it like you were showing that you were the producers of your own image? Rather than being manufactured?

Pryce: We're not coming up here to flash flesh to try to get attention; it was we loved- whatever this new thing came into our life, we wanted it and we wanted it badly.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: And it just happened.

Suterwalla: The way that I'm- the whole focus of my project is about dress and style.

Pryce: Yes.

Suterwalla: So the dress is really, really important, and what I've identified is there seem to be two types of dress happening in this period.

Pryce: Yes. In hip-hop or just in general?

Suterwalla: In hip-hop.

Pryce: In hip-hop. Okay.

Suterwalla: And then it's feeding into the mainstream. The first is what I'm calling androgyny and cross-dressing, so women dressing like men, or what I mean is in a more masculine way, or wearing men's clothes.

Pryce: Tomboyish? Yes. Okay.

Suterwalla: Yes. And the other is what I'm calling hypersexualisation. So, I interview- one of the other people that I've interviewed for this chapter is Kym Mazelle from Soul II Soul.

Pryce: Oh right. Okay.

Suterwalla: And she mentioned things like grinding in hip-hop, the pump'n'grind, and how that was there in hip-hop. And what it might have meant for women's expression of their bodies and sexuality. And the clothes around this, like the cycling shorts -

Pryce: From that era? That era? Yes. Cycling shorts were in at one point, weren't they?

Suterwalla: Yes, yes. And I talked to her about whether it was about showing a new kind of black feminine confidence and she said it was about saying, yes, you can look but, you know, you can't touch because in hip-hop I'm owning this look, I'm in charge kind of thing. It was about strength and empowerment, broadly speaking.

Pryce: Yes, yes.

Suterwalla: So the idea of shaking your booty, you know- what do you think about that view?

Pryce: Yes. And you have to be the sort of person- I would find it difficult, and- what's the word? You have to be a certain type of person to be confident to do that.

Suterwalla: Yes. Obviously not everyone did that. But did you notice an element of that in hip-hop from your experience?

Pryce: Oh yeah, there was that, but for us it was the other thing you brought up. We adopted the tomboy, the more androgynous thing because we- we weren't- we weren't hyper-feminine. We weren't- weren't girly? No, we just- you know what? We just didn't want to- We were very conscious about how girls carried themselves and I suppose we weren't raised in that capacity where, you know, you get to your teenage years and your skirt suddenly gets up there and then your- gets down there. You know like you see young girls today? It just wasn't a part of our genetic make-up, so when we adopted the whole tomboy look, it wasn't masculine to us. We were just like, girls looking fly. We were B-girls and we were happy to be called B-girls, because that-

Suterwalla: What do you mean if- because I know these are the words used but what do you mean by fly? What does that mean to you?

Pryce: Fly is like you dress- Fly, you've got on the latest, the flyest gear.

Suterwalla: Is that like-

Pryce: If you look fly, that means you look hot. Like you look hot in a hip-hop way. You know? You can look fly in any way but in those days, like fly and fresh and, like, yes, you look fly. It didn't mean like, oh, you look sexy; it was like you look- because we had on the hip-hop attire down to a button and we wore it well.  
Looking 'fly' not just about the clothes but about how you carry them

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: So we were happy with- if it was masculine. At the time it wasn't- there were-

Suterwalla: So, was it more that fly was about looking masculine in hip-hop?

Pryce: No. Fly was- not necessarily- fly was just a descriptive word. It wasn't to say you were dressed masculine but you looked- no. You looked fly, whatever you had on whether you looked like a man or a woman.

Suterwalla: It worked. Do you mean you looked good?

Pryce: Yes. Exactly.

Suterwalla: And what about fresh? Look fresh?

Pryce: When you look fresh, it's the same thing. It has the same meaning but with fly, I think fly was sort of like was more female kind of directed. You know? You look fly. Fly girl. Yes. Fly girl, B-boys. But we didn't- we loved being called fly girls or B-girls, because you're a B-girl- you're a B-girl which meant, you know, you had a hip-hop stance. You had a B-boy stance and to us the whole B-boy stance thing was a great image. You know? If you saw that-

Suterwalla: Which was coming from America?

Pryce: Yes. If you saw like a graffiti kind of spray and it was like a B-boy with that stance, it's like, and you're a B-girl? That means I'm a female version of that. That's hot. Do you know what I mean? It was cool.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: There was no, like, shit – they're dressed like men. No. We were wearing men's trousers; we were wearing-

Suterwalla: But was it associated with a kind of- a kind of new feminist politics? I mean, was it that it was about new freedoms for women? That you could get up and you could be equal to men and you were taken seriously. Was that part of your consciousness?

Pryce: Oh I think it definitely was, and because it was male-dominated, and in any environment we went into, if we walked into a room or we walked into an event or a club and we were on a bill, we were the only females on a bill but we never felt- there was a certain element of girl power, so to speak, but we felt very comfortable in our zone and we felt very comfortable within the male zone as well. There was no, you know, there was no degree of separation. And we felt that energy. If other females came on the scene and they weren't looking fly or they weren't dressed like B-girls, the way they were treated was slightly different. You know?

Suterwalla: So these were women who still kind of-

Pryce: Be around. Yes. There were girls on the scene who were there because they-

Suterwalla: Because sometimes the hip-hop stuff can look, when I looked at pictures, it can look a bit like the dance hall stuff.

Pryce: What? UK- The UK style?

Suterwalla: Yes. Like, much more sexually provocative.

Pryce: Oh, absolutely- yeah there was that, I'm not saying there wasn't. But I think that whole- that wasn't for us and anyway I think that whole sexual thing has got a lot worse in later years.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: And I think, from the women's perspective, when Salt-N-Pepa came and, you know, had their- whatever their song was, *Push It* and *Let's Talk About Sex* and that, they kind of like opened up the doors for women to feel that confidence. We never had that tone of voice before they came. You know? When we were doing our stuff, it was all about your fly gear, your freshest lyrics and being in the club. It wasn't nothing sexual, and I think when the whole sexual thing kind of came in, we kind of like, you know, can we start seeing videos? You know? Videos were a big thing and any video we watch is like a girl in a bikini. But we used to love when we saw videos when they had female dancers and, you know, male dancers either mixed together or separate, but they're doing dance routines and they got on normal- you know, they dressed hip-hop. We loved that. But yeah, I mean it was good for women to have confidence. It just depended what you wanted.

Suterwalla: So that wasn't part of your style? I guess there were lots of different ways of being hip-hop?

Pryce: Yes. Our influences, our styling influences, there was the stuff coming from the US as well. It was a real mix. You know? Like I said, the goose jackets. Everything we had- Everything we wore, a lot of it we had to get from America. You couldn't get it here and it wasn't until later years that somebody, some guy opened up a shop in Camden called Five Star General, and he sold all of that stuff. He would, like, import them in or export them-

Suterwalla: It's not Jazzie B, is it?

Pryce: No, no. Not Jazzie B. It was another guy who used to be on the scene. I can't remember his real name but his shop was called Five Star General. And it's one of those shops, you know when you go into- if you want to get American-style clothing, you can go into Croydon, you can go into Peckham. It's one of those shops but in the '80s.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: And you could, you know, he'd sell a goose jacket but he used to sell it- and then we'd mix it with our local stuff. It was about mixing, you know being fresh.

Suterwalla: Oh, okay.

Pryce: They were called goose down jackets. If you had one of those you were fly and we had the hottest ones. I had a red one. Oh shit...that picture.

Suterwalla: Can you talk to me about- I'm just going to say for the mic that I'm now showing Debbie a picture of Cookie Crew that was taken by Normski in the 1980s.

Pryce: As you can see, we have the name belts. I must have had my name belt on.

Suterwalla: Do you remember this picture being taken? Can you talk to me about it? What's this picture about? And please talk me through the clothes. Talk me through the way it's making you feel.

Pryce: Wow. This was- was this- I think- was this at an event at Camden? I think we did an event at Camden. These clothes- now, this is- oh, yes. These jackets, I think we got them from Topshop, and we were very- everything we wore, as you noticed here, it had to be baggy. We weren't into anything that was close-fitting. If we bought trousers, guarantee, I'm smaller, my trousers have been huge and anything like shirts we'd buy men's size. Nothing could ever fit us as close as that. We would die.

Suterwalla: And your hair, you've got cornrows, right? Was that an African influence thing? Was that about that sort of identity?

Pryce: Yes. Our trademark was, The Cookies, we always had our hair-

Suterwalla: There is a black reference there. Or not?

Pryce: Erm. At that period, it wasn't conscious. It was that era when I was having my hair braided by my sister and I put beads on the end, but after a while, because we always had our hair like that, that was a Cookie Crew trademark. Our trademark was we always wore red and white. That was our, like, uniform when we performed. And then we kind of grew out of that. And having our hair in beads. So if anybody- any time we used to go anywhere, and girls used to have their hair in- because in those days, you know, if you were a fan of someone you'd start dressing like them.

Suterwalla: Yes, yes, yes. But it wasn't an African reference necessarily? It wasn't political in that way?

Pryce: Girls used to do their hair in beads, it was just how it was, it wasn't a big deal, and then it was kind of like with the fans. But it was all exciting. It wasn't-

Suterwalla: So it wasn't a cultural reference for you.

Pryce: No. It wasn't at all. It was just- it wasn't that deep. Yes. it wasn't that deep. This was just our image, which- we didn't sit down and say we were going to be Afro-centric. It wasn't until probably the- maybe in the early '90s we had a sense of Afro-centricity, whatever it is.

Suterwalla: Yes. Can you say more about this?

Pryce: All the whole political stuff started happening in America. You know? The Black Power and we did get some of that because we were in tune with what the Americans were doing. Remember, American acts were coming to the UK a lot to do shows, so we were identifying with what they were wearing, what chains they had around their neck and it was very, you know, red, yellow, green, black.

Suterwalla: What does that belt say?

Pryce: It says Susan.

Suterwalla: Susan. And did you have yours?

Pryce: Yes. Mine would have said Debbie. Yes.

Suterwalla: Debbie? And then you've got your medallions. Where would they have come from?

Pryce: They would have come from New York. Either New York or- Probably New York. Maybe New York or Topshop.

Suterwalla: Right. So you could get this stuff in Topshop by then?

Pryce: Yeah, they had it. Yes. New York or Topshop. These outfits we bought in the UK. All this was put together in the UK.

Suterwalla: Would you have thought about the fact that this is what the men were wearing as well?

Pryce: Well, men-

Suterwalla: Were you looking to dress the same?

Pryce: Yes. We had to wear trousers. We wouldn't be caught—In our early days we used to wear—when we first came out with the whole red and white thing with these little white skirts on, but they weren't, like—they weren't horrible-looking. They were—My mum made them so they were pretty— But we always had tights on so we'd wear a white skirt and we had these red and white, like, baseball jackets, so our whole thing was we came—We were booked to do a show: we're coming in red and white.

But, like I said, we grew out of that. Our trousers would never be too close. The only time we—our trousers may have been slightly fitted was when we started wearing Lee. Remember Lee Cooper jeans? And the material trousers became B-boy trousers, so we had to have those. But I would always-

Suterwalla: What's the- were many of your influences from the mainstream fashions?

Pryce: Not particularly. No. No.

Suterwalla: Right. And would you dress differently for shows? I mean, you've said the colour-coding and everything, but in terms of sort of general style, would you dress differently, very differently in your day-to-day?

Pryce: Not- no. As far as we were concerned, the moment we got up, whatever we put on was hip-hop, and so that would be us whether we were in work mode or just in casual everyday-

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: Remember, we had jobs to go to during the week, so my mentality was-

Suterwalla: What did you do in the day-to-day?

Pryce: I was a chef at the Ministry of Defence. Susie was studying, but then she was a nursery teacher at a nursery in Balham. So we always held our jobs until it became, you know, a full-time thing, which was in 1988, when we signed a recording contract. But prior to that we were gigging and- gigging and working.

Suterwalla: And-

Pryce: And loved every fucking minute of it. Excuse my language.

Suterwalla: Yes. I bet. I mean, it sounds-

Pryce: It was so- and, with us as well, our styling and what we wore to a particular jam or event was always pre-planned.

Suterwalla: Right. So it was very deliberately put together? You were very conscious of what and why you were wearing, is that what you mean?

Pryce: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't like- we always kind of- whether we had different colours, the outfit was the same.

Suterwalla: But that's not red. That's white.

Pryce: I know. This is white and mine was probably navy blue.

Suterwalla: Yes. Now we've flipped it up a bit-

Pryce: Oh right. Yes.

Suterwalla: This is probably. You're in a B- B-girl-

Pryce: I'm in a B-girl stance.

Suterwalla: Right okay.

Pryce: I wouldn't mess around.

Suterwalla: Okay. And what's- talk to me about the bling.

Pryce: The bling was- none of it was real gold. It was just the biggest earrings you could possibly find and, in fact, you could see-

Suterwalla: I've seen in videos on YouTube you've got-

Pryce: Yeah the big square ones.

Suterwalla: Yes. Yes, like disco ones.

Pryce: Yes. Because they did sell them here.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: And now you can get them anywhere. The fake ones, which are horrible. But when we went to America, our first thing was to sort out getting our belts, getting the big dookie earrings, as they used to call them. And we bought them and, you know, we got the round ones and the square ones.

Suterwalla: Where would you get one in America?

Pryce: Anywhere. It wasn't- see, it was stuff that we couldn't get here that was so special, when you got to America it was just in any and every shop, and we'd particularly go into Chinatown to get certain items. You know? It was watches, our gazelle glasses, and there's a hotspot in the Bronx, which is my hotspot – it's called Fordham Road and everybody knows about Fordham Road and it has all the shops. And it's all changed now but before, you know, you'd go and it would have all the jewellery in the window. I think some of the shops are still out there but there were certain shops I used to go to on Fordham Road and I used to go back every year and the shopkeepers knew me, so I used to put my orders in for the name belts, because everyone wanted name belts and I'd have to go and order them and bring them back with me. So it was very important how we put everything together, because our thing was when we arrived in a jam-

Suterwalla: Because this was like cutting edge here-

Pryce: Oh my god. Yes.

Suterwalla: Do you know what I mean? Everyone was then copying you.

Pryce: Absolutely. And it was just like high street clothes. It wasn't custom-made. We didn't get- you know we were just putting stuff that we found together you know.

Suterwalla: Is this a tracksuit?

Pryce: No. These are- those are track- but we did used to wear tracksuits, actually. We had a range of tracksuits which we were addicted to but we had them in different colours.

Suterwalla: Right. Where from?

Pryce: Oh, all over. So if we were on tour, like we were yellow one night, orange one night, so, like I said, we always had- wanted to have baggy clothes on.

Suterwalla: Right. So that comes back to how you felt in the clothes, the bagginess was important.

Pryce: But these were trousers and this- I think- I'm sure we got these from Top- it would have been Topshop.

Suterwalla: So I'm quite interested by your hair here because one of the things that I'm thinking about in this chapter is that British hip-hop was not about being black; it was actually about being British black. It's about being a diaspora. You know?

Pryce: Yes.

Suterwalla: And so I'm quite interested in what you said about your hair – that it wasn't about Africanness.

Pryce: No. It wasn't.

Suterwalla: Is that just the way that your hair would have been done while you were growing up?

Pryce: Yes. Exactly. That was just the standard attire. It just became our trademark. Overnight, it literally became our trademark. Because we'd probably done a couple of gigs and we had-

Suterwalla: So it's not like you were drawing from Angela Davis or-

Pryce: No. There's none of that. Those kind of things, if we were aware of them, it wasn't- at this time it was all about- it was all about just being happy and enjoying the music and absorbing what the scene was. There was no element of politics, like that American black politics, on our agenda.

Suterwalla: But did you feel that although America was such an important influence – I mean, you were there four to six weeks a year, which was plenty of time. Did you feel that when you brought it here that you changed it because you were back in Britain? Was it- did the space of Britain, the context of Britain change with what you did with hip-hop?

Pryce: Yes. I think when I went away it was almost- it was an important thing because it was almost like going on a holiday because you need to rejuvenate, like I said. When I came back I felt like I was coming back and we were doing our thing, you know we were into it.

Suterwalla: You mentioned that you had reggae influences in your background. Were you influenced by punk or other things like Rock Against Racism? You know?

Pryce: The punk style- the reggae stuff, because we grew up in reggae. At least, obviously, I used to listen to reggae and our influences are reggae, and also we have incorporated that into our music. We were very aware of the punk element because King's Road on a Saturday afternoon. We loved going down there just to go and look at these, you know, walk up and down the shops – we had no money to spend but just to see the whole punk scene going on and that was almost- looking back at that-

Suterwalla: Is this in the early '80s?

Pryce: Yes. Looking back at that, the way they were getting together and being- you know, that whole unity thing, that's what hip-hop was. They had their space. They had their location: King's Road. We had our own little thing and that was Promenade and that was Charing Cross and that was Leicester Square, so it's like different genres were having their little power movements. Kind of almost neck and neck but nobody crossed- crossed wires. That's kind of like a weird thing.

Suterwalla: But America was an important and regular influence for you.

Pryce: Yes. Ooh – we were heavily into UK pop music. Don't get me twisted. We loved... Dexys Midnight Runners; we loved Culture Club...it's almost like we didn't see a degree of separation between the love of hip-hop and pop music when we all watched *Top of the Pops*.

To us, all music was good at that time. Whether it was punk, rock 'n roll or just general pop music...At one point we thought we were mods. We went to the whole mod thing through the dressing in black-and-white...Oh yes. Shirts. We'd get our dad's tie out. Get our dad's—you know, the men's jacket. Oh yes. We embraced a lot of things.

Suterwalla: Why did you pick that up?

Pryce: Because it was cool. We were heavily into that music because that's what we were seeing on *Top of the Pops*. What was that, Thursday evening, between 7 and 7:30. Sorry – 7 and 7:25 was *Top of the Pops*. So that's where we were educated. And if you see a group on TV, you want to dress like them or you want to-

Suterwalla: So, when you saw Neneh Cherry go on *Top of the Pops*, what did you think of her? And then when you saw her go on pregnant, what did you think of all of that?

Pryce: Yes. I don't know. It was- like, when that happened, back in those days that was like- it was like big talk. You know? She's on TV, she's pregnant, it's just not right type thing but in the same breath it was kind of cool because she was a part of the hip-hop scene as well. She was- there were clubs that we used to go to and hang out and we all knew the same people, so we were part of the same thing. So when she kind of went that way, she still had an element of hip-hop, which was strong, but she was obviously quite savvy to that whole crossover mainstream appeal before any of us, and it worked for her. You know? A lot of people- she's not- she wasn't the greatest singer in the world. Well, her songs wasn't- it was kind of speaking what was happening at the moment. Yes, people spoke about that. You know? How disgusting it was and blah, blah. I don't remember having an opinion. I just thought, wow.

Suterwalla: You didn't feel that you were being, as a black woman in hip-hop you were all being put in the same pot?

Pryce: No. Not at all.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: Not at all. Everybody had their individual identity.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: And their individual career paths.

Suterwalla: Let me talk a bit about representation. How did you feel the music press and the mainstream press reacted to you?

Pryce: I must say, we got a fair amount of press -

Suterwalla: - the same level as black men?

Pryce: Yes, absolutely, because it was a novelty at the time. It was, oh yes? There were a few, you know, sparks of others that were around but they weren't making the impact that we were. But, yes, we were getting the editorial columns and the features, and the front covers, because it was- I suppose it was a big deal back in those days.

Suterwalla: What, you mean a new group, or a new all-female hip-hop group?

Pryce: Yeah. And this is even before we'd signed a major recording contract, because we were doing shows and making a name for ourselves and, you know, and everything was word of mouth and when we used to do interviews they said, you know, journalists used to come around our house and then all the photo-shoots that we used to do, it was always local.

Suterwalla: Oh right.

Pryce: We'd go to Clapham South tube station. It was very crowded, that area. It was very crowded, the whole- we were from South London, so one of our things was we wanted a photograph at Chapel South, in the tube station, standing in front of the- you know the logo?

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: So we did that. We have a few pictures there and I think that - we did that, and then we took pictures on Clapham Common. Everything we did was very home-bound. And then, even when we went on tour- when we went on tour, we had our banner made, our backdrop manner, and it was the London Underground logo, but instead of saying Clapham South it said Cookie Club.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: It was- it was a ginormous canvas banner that we had made. It was huge. We were so proud so, you know, everything to us revolved around here, revolved around us and-

Suterwalla: You were creating a really different image for black women.

Pryce: Yes.

Suterwalla: How do you think that that compared to what they were being shown in *Vogue* and in the press and, you know, because you've got the glamorous versus the street type thing. Was that- were you aware of that when you were putting your image together?

Pryce: Yes. I think it was- it was in your face. It was on magazines- I mean, just like now, you- TV advertising, any kind of media coverage. You see that side of beauty 0:54:45 but we were always very, very adamant that we were street. We didn't want to take-

Suterwalla: What does that mean?

Pryce: We were real to who we were. We were real to our culture.

Suterwalla: Do you mean keeping it- keeping it real, which is like the-

Pryce: Yes. Keep it real is-

Suterwalla: The tag line of it.

Pryce: Be yourself. Yes. Be real. We're not pretending that we live in amazing mansions and we've got millions of pounds when we don't – we live normal lives and we live comfortably.

Suterwalla: And that's keeping it real.

Pryce: And the whole thing about keeping our street credibility was very important to us as well. We didn't want to- we didn't want to do anything too commercial. There were a few things that we turned down, you know, whether it was to travel to a certain country or to do a certain feature or to- something associated with crossing over. You dare not cross over.

Suterwalla: Where- How did you define that? Where would you have known that you crossed over?

Pryce: It would be-

Suterwalla: Is it that you had- yes, sorry...

Pryce: It would be the sound of our music. Our remixes were kind of changed and we were very in tune with who our fan base were and we were very in tune with the people around us, which, I mean, in a sense, to us were the most important critics. If we made a record or were about to do something that was slightly too popular or slightly too commercial, we'd think about it twice. Like you don't want to- you don't want to sell out or you don't want- you don't want to lose the scene's support. That was very important. I don't think it was even on our radar about selling records.

Suterwalla: But the thing is you were- you were commercial.

Pryce: Eventually we were commercial. We- but we were commercial- we were commercial but with the right music. We didn't sell- we didn't-

Suterwalla: You didn't sell out your music?

Pryce: Yes. We didn't sell out. What happened was that the scene and hip-hop naturally became popular, so pop music was popular music. So, we could have made a hit record, and because we were new on that scene and it was the new thing, all labels want it, that's why we were signed. And who we were became commercial, and that was fine. We didn't- there was no way

that we sold out or did something to prostitute our reputation or anything. It was kind of- it was a natural process, so-

Suterwalla: You didn't feel any conflict between your- what you wanted and what the record industry wanted?

Pryce: Of course they wanted stuff a bit more commercial and you'd have to compromise on either remixes or- and the thing is, I don't know how it stands now but back in those days, when you had an album deal, you had to give the label a number of commercially viable singles, which we naturally were. You know? Because you evolve. As you're an artist and you're writing and your environment changes, your lyrical- you can make yourself commercial without selling out, so- and we had our hard-core fans and we had our mainstream fans; it worked for both. I mean look at stuff now, do they know what they're doing? Do they know how to sell records? Do they know how to market? Remember, it was a very fresh music and people who were employed by labels weren't geared up for black music, for black British music that's hip-hop. It was just like everything now, if something's a fad, every artist is getting signed under the sun and then, eighteen months later, they're dropped. You know? So there's that- it's a business. The whole thing is a business. And I don't think we sat down and said, right, we need to fight- we could have. We could have done so much more, but because of our credibility in keeping it real, we turned down a lot of things and we refused to do certain things that we didn't want to be associated with. And that's because we loved hip-hop, and that was the only reason.

Suterwalla: So when you say your credibility in the street, how is that measured? I mean, is it, you know, when the people who come to clubs, they listen to, you know-

Pryce: Yes. It's just your fans. It's just- it's just that- it's that organic feeling of you're just out somewhere and you might be shopping and somebody recognises you or, you know, it's just- it's that and it's also completely connected 0:58:45 with your community and, you know, we had- we had a few issues with people who, in places that we lived and people who come and bother us or throw stones at our window and, you know, there was an element where your own people were against you because there was an element of jealousy. You're doing well and you live in a nice house, oh, you're driving that car. I thought you were rich. Of course, you had that,

because they're humans. We're like that. We're sick individuals. It didn't stop us from progressing.

Suterwalla: So that was about jealousy? What's the thing about- you- because you mentioned the car and I'm just thinking about this- the idea of making money off this and it being a kind of- you know, how hip-hop is associated with entrepreneurship. So Jazzie B went off and opened that shop, and he's been very entrepreneurial, and it was the time of Thatcher's Britain.

Pryce: Yes.

Suterwalla: Was hip-hop entrepreneurial for you? Did you think it was an entrepreneurial space and culture? Was the material show or bling part of that?

Pryce: Oh, it certainly was.

Suterwalla: And was the thing about a kind of desire- was it an expression of desire or was it just-

Pryce: Yes, sure for a lot of people- the little bling that we wore there, well, that was like costume jewellery. Yes – we did have a pair of real gold ones that I bought in New York. It wasn't that expensive, but we weren't about bling. But I know what you mean. There was the bling, about having stuff.

Suterwalla: What's that about with the name belt? Showing your name, showing it-

Pryce: Well, because you're an artist. You have like a street name or a breaker's name. It was just part of the attire. The name belt, the name change, the gazelle glasses, which were the B-boy, the Run DMC glasses, the Kangol hat. That's all part of the attire. I mean, in our days, people were comfortable enough but the money that's being made now, that wasn't happening back in the days, and I think a lot of, erm- after sort of that era, a lot of American artists have been disgruntled because they, you know, they either signed dodgy deals or they got ripped off. They weren't making the money. You know? But nowadays it is about bling and it is giving people the opportunities to expand, open their business, going into films, going into clothing lines. It's more of a- it's an opportunity to branch off into something else. You know? And certainly in recent years it's been happening big time here where artists have done stuff and then, oh,

someone's opened a t-shirt company and this, that and the other but it's all about will they be able to maintain it? Anyway that's now not then. But it was entrepreneurial. But for us we always thought 'We're not going to have those big fuck off houses and unnecessary cars, unnecessary friends.' It's just- to me that's just a waste of time when there are starving children. I don't- to me, I don't associate that with music. Our passion was for music, the culture and the whole lifestyle. For us it was about is your record hot and is your train- are your trainers hot? Like, they weren't necessarily trainers that cost £200. But that's as far as it went.

Suterwalla: Why was style so important in that culture? Why was it important to be fresh, to be fly, why did what you were wearing matter so much? Could you give a bit more detail about that?

Pryce: Yes. The way we presented ourselves, it was important not only because we were women in a male-dominated scene but we realised that we were- we were a brand and we were marketing material... we were very in tune with younger girls and being role models, and we had a lot of fans and a lot of girls who used to write letters to us thanking us for who we were, particularly how we dressed and how they want to be like us, and that meant a lot to us...

Suterwalla: But what about even before you- like when you were hanging around on Saturday afternoons, you mentioned that you were very conscious even then.

Pryce: About what we had on. Yes. I don't know. It just was. It's almost like with you, if you're into this thing, you have to- to us, it was a lifestyle. It wasn't about, hey, we like stuff. It was our life. When we got up in the morning, it was hip-hop. When we went to work, it was hip-hop. Anything we did, anything we touched or ate, it was hip-hop and it- and we took it quite seriously. Sometimes we might be somewhere and you saw something, or you saw someone just say they're not very hip-hop. You know? Somebody does something, like, that wasn't a very hip-hop thing to do. So it was more than just putting on a record and listening to music. It was- you understood the culture and what hip-hop is, and it meant change. You know? There's hip-hop and there's rap. Those are two different things. And the culture is still very important to me and it's made me who I am today. It's been my livelihood for... twenty-five years! Some people said we were difficult and-like when we went on *Top of the Pops* for the first time. We'd- we've never

heard about miming. What is miming? So, and this is back in the '80s and in those days, cameramen, the sound stuff, they were all old boys. So we were in the '80s. The cameramen had been working there since probably the '60s or '70s, and we said we want to perform live. The biggest uproar in the BBC. We're causing problems because we want to perform, so they had to do a whole rigging thing.

We bloody performed live. Why would we mime? It didn't make sense to us. We didn't understand, you know, we said we wanted to perform live and we couldn't understand why there was an issue and why- so, when we were filming it's like, you know, the attitudes were there because they were older boys but when we performed and they realised what we executed, we got handshakes after that, you know? And also, the other thing we came up against was the whole make-up, thing, we refused to wear make-up. It took us a minute to realise, you know, when you do photo sessions, you know you have to do make-up. Videos. We understood that. But the early days? Put make-up on us? No! We just weren't girls who bought make-up. We had lip gloss. That was about it, but foundation, this and that. So when we had photo shoots or video shoots and we had make-up artists we said, look, it has to be very neutral and, you know, it took a bit of getting used to and we just weren't into it. But we did it when it was necessary but, trust me, it was a battle. Performing live and not wearing make-up was a huge battle for us and just, you know, who we had to work with because, for one, we didn't need it but now I realise why we wear make-up for photo shoots – because that's just the norm.

Suterwalla: There's- you know, people who talked about the way that- we touched on this bit before, about the way that wearing Lycra, coming from the '80s, that- wearing Lycra suddenly was this really big kind of statement about showing your body.

Pryce: Oh. We never got into that.

Suterwalla: And it was like a second skin.

Pryce: Yes. Literally. It was like- all-in-one catsuit and it was just a jacket on top of that and it was like, well, what about your arse? No. I think with that- that was not our thing but it was for a lot of people and that's fine, I don't have any issue with it.

Suterwalla: Did you know- did you feel that that had anything to do with new ways of showing the black body, with confidence?

Pryce: There was a movement but I don't think the movement was strong enough in the UK, and I think at that stage as well, the scene was slightly changing and then, you know, we were still involved but there was that element of the scene's changing and it looks like we're slightly moving out. It was big in America.

Suterwalla: It was more like Salt-N-Pepa and-

Pryce: Yes. It was definitely going on.

Suterwalla: Right.

Pryce: And that's about it. It's that, if you're going to be in hip-hop, you've got to be doing it for you, doing your thing, however that it, that's what we did, you know with our look. There was of course the more girly stuff. All that sexual stuff, it's going to happen.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Pryce: There'd be a point in our lives where we wouldn't even go out if we had our jeans on. We had to have a jumper tied around our waist because we didn't want anyone to see the size of our bum. Rappers in different scenes had different stuff.

[Interview diverts to a conversation about rappers in different scenes in contemporary hip-hop and how Pryce has talked about hip-hop in other interviews. Then Suterwalla asks Pryce about where to access archive material, photographs, and recommendations for other participants to interview. This part of the transcript has not been included here].

End

## Chapter 4 The Fold of the Hijab: 2001 to the present

### Sarah Joseph

Interview date: 21 July 2009.

Location: *emel*, Finchley Road, London.

Duration of interview: 1 hour and 4 minutes.

Start

Suterwalla: Thank you for your time; I will just introduce myself very briefly. I myself worked as a journalist actually for about ten years and when I took my maternity leave I decided to go back into academia so I am doing this research for a PhD, and my research really is a culmination of issues that I've been interested in both as a journalist and now in the academic space and they are really around identity politics in Britain. The reason I wanted to speak to you in particular was because I was very interested by the fact that you set up this magazine as a response to events from 2001, and a sense that the identity for British Muslims was coming under siege. I'd like to start by hearing about that please. And then I'd like to hear your thoughts on the significance of the hijab within that debate of identity construction within the British context. So perhaps if we could start with your thoughts as to why you felt you needed to set up the magazine in 2003?

Joseph: To be honest with you the idea for the magazine came prior to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I think we were on holiday in Dubai at the beginning of 2000 I think, in 2000 or 1999 and I had worked as a student in magazines, I had been brought up in magazines, my mother had run a model agency and so I've grown up within, being surrounded by front covers and magazines and that type of media. I'm an English convert so I embraced Islam in 1988; I embraced Islam just months before the whole Salman Rushdie thing hit the fan.

Suterwalla: Was that a coincidence?

Joseph: Yes it was, that didn't lead me to study Islam, I embraced Islam from a theological perspective in a theological journey and just as I entered into it many things happened.

Suterwalla: How did you encounter Islam?

Joseph: My brother embraced Islam, I was a devout Roman Catholic and actually had contemplated becoming a nun and my brother embraced Islam in order to marry a very, very beautiful Muslim girl and I felt that he had sold himself to the devil for the sake of a woman and I had to explore my issues surrounding how I felt about Islam. Not that I knew much about it but I didn't have any positive notions and the notions were of 1970's Palestinian terrorism, had something to do with the black box in the Middle East and of course my mother's model agency was on New Bond Street, so I had grown up down New Bond Street and along Oxford Street etc. and surrounding Mayfair. I was educated in my primary school in Mayfair and so that, during the 1970's, I saw lots and lots of Arab women in yashmaks and they were my very minimal images of Islam. So when my brother took this path I felt very angry and I had issues and my mother said, 'well you do know that they believe that Jesus was born of a virgin?' And I said 'no, I didn't' and I think I was about thirteen or fourteen and I actually believed her. You've got to understand that I was a highly politicised fourteen year old, thirteen year old, I was incredibly religious, my issues were not boy bands my issues were the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, my issues were anti apartheid those type of things were what drove me. I was the youngest of five children.

Suterwalla: Yes that is a young age to be so politicised. Where were those ideas and influences coming from?

Joseph: Yes, I think my set of circumstances, I've grown up with adults, I grew up in the model agency, my children now come into my work. I grew up in my mother's model agency, I grew up with adults, the average age of my friends was fifteen years above my own, my acquaintances I should say.

Suterwalla: But I guess when you were growing up you were witnessing the politics of the 1970s and 1980s?

Joseph: I suppose it was an interesting time in terms of the miner's strike, in terms of the failure of the Labour movement to address social issues or to feel that social pulse, it didn't get it. I grew up in the age of Thatcherism, I was born in 1971, whilst really struggling with those issues, I remember I got caught up in the Notting Hill riots, but my mother was very clued up anti-racist etc. So when I was exposed to the fact that I had prejudices towards Islam I found that quite horrifying within myself because we had always been

brought up not to be prejudiced and so I am realising, 'well hold on a minute I don't feel comfortable with this', and I had to address those issues. So I found out that Muslims believe that Jesus was born of a virgin which kind of pacified my theological misgivings for a time anyway and by and by I kept studying Islam, by and by I lost my faith in the Catholic Church which had actually nothing to do with my Islam but to do with the sort of sense, it is all irrelevant for you...

Suterwalla: No, no it's very interesting.

Joseph: ...a sense of the Council of Nicaea and forty Gospels were submitted to the Council of Nicaea and only four were chosen and then finally the issues of papal infallibility, so in the 1860's Italy was being unified, Papal State was threatened, 1870 Pope himself declares himself infallible and I really struggled with that and I lost my faith completely in the Catholic church at that particular juncture but I didn't lose my faith in God and so I continued to study Islam and continued to try and attempt to surrender my life to God and ultimately became a Muslim. A very theological journey that was about faith, that was about God, was about surrender and service.

Suterwalla: Where did you study it and how included did you feel within an idea of Muslim community?

Joseph: Well Muslim community going back, this is the mid to late 80's, was not what you see today. It was, I met Muslims, they were always sure of their faith, unlike for example people in the Catholic church, or perhaps more so with Catholics, they tend to be quite certain of who they are, particularly coming from a Hispanic or Irish backgrounds but if you met Christians in general there was never that kind of strong, assertiveness about their faith, even Muslims who weren't practicing were strongly assertive about, 'we're Muslims, were right' type of thing.

Suterwalla: And when you say Muslims, South Asian Muslims...?

Joseph: They were all South Asians really; I didn't really meet anybody who wasn't South Asian.

Suterwalla: Did you feel that they had a particular cultural interpretation for Islam, could you connect with that?

Joseph: Oh for sure, well I think that when I first became a Muslim and I embraced Islam in 1988 at the beginning of that I think that just the 'Pakistanisation' or the 'Arabisation' or the 'Turkisation' of Muslims, of converts when they embrace Islam, whatever community you embrace or you meet after you first embrace, so say for example you are engaged within the Malaysian community you will embrace that cultural framework and identity. It took me probably about four or five years of being a Muslim perhaps even slightly less to say, 'well hold on a minute, I'm Muslim but I'm not Pakistani or I'm a Muslim but I'm not an Indian, I'm a Muslim and I'm also English', and it was really getting married to my husband who is of Bengali background actually, Bengali heritage, but who really felt that Islam is not a culture and I think it was that sense of realisation after I had been a Muslim for about four and half years. Islam is not a culture; Islam is a sense of values, a generative force that can, is for all people and for all time for all space. Not because it remains the same, not because it is the seventh century but because it has the ability to generate and influence and give value and parameter to any time and space that it finds itself in and so I gained confidence and increasingly... so that 'look, I am who I am, I am English, God made me English, God placed me in England and it is what my heritage is but I am also Muslim', and the two don't conflict.

Suterwalla: When in '89 the fact the *fatwa* was declared against Rushdie who, what effect did that have on your identity as a Muslim girl?

Joseph: I don't think it personally...at the time particularly, because I think I was just still so new and exploring my faith that it didn't really have the same resonance and impact. I remember reading the book at the time, finding the first third very funny and finding the rest of it a bit off, but that was really it for me. I got caught up, I was standing at a bus stop and somehow I managed to get caught up in one of the rallies and not actually feeling, and this is somebody who had been on marches ad nauseam since I was you know...we had been on every CND march, every anti-apartheid march and not feeling comfortable at that march because you had young people with their Palestinian scarves covering their faces and there was just a few things in that which I thought, 'mm I don't like this'. And so it wasn't really for me. So I never really, whilst it touched upon me, people asked me questions about it, it never, I never got sucked into it at that time, I suppose I was just too new to the faith.

Suterwalla: Could you at that stage differentiate between this point that you make about Islam not being a culture and finding a new identity and how would you disentangle those two issues or connect them?

Joseph: I think for me, even before I became a Muslim I remember one of my early engagements with the mullah. He told me...I hadn't actually taken the *shahadah* [declaration of faith] although I was fasting, covering my hair and praying I hadn't actually gone to the mosque and taken the *shahadah* because I was waiting for my mother. My mother was living in America at the time, and the mullah said to me, 'Oh, your mother will burn in hell, she will stand on her head, her skin will peel off and it will then grow again so it can burn off and peel again'. And I remember being so utterly horrified and the first thing I did was ask someone to take me to a church. Not because I was still a Christian, not because I believe in it anymore, but because that was my point of reference and I lit a candle for her soul. And then I got back home and... and I got back home and I didn't have a Quran in my house so I opened the bible, because I was praying to Allah, I was always prone to pray and to be connected to my text so I opened the bible and thought well this was a text of God, it has to have something in here for me, because I was utterly devastated actually, someone telling you that about your mother who you love so much.

The first verse that caught my eye, 'all people shall be judged with justice and equity', and I thought, 'yeah that's God, I'm going to leave it to God'. So at that very, very early juncture I thought there are Muslims and there is my faith and I could completely see them, both of them. There was good Christians and there was bad Christians, there is Christians that hold the values of Christ and you feel have got that sense of the message of Christ, and there are things that you think that they have completely missed the plot. And we saw that with the Irish and the terrorists and the sort of Catholic/Protestant divisions etc. and I knew as a Catholic when I had been that...that that wasn't for me. I was not a Catholic who supported the IRA or a Catholic that wanted you know, so I was completely capable of making those divisions within my Christianity so I was completely capable of making those divisions within my Islam. I didn't idolise Muslims, I didn't become Muslim because of Muslims, I became a Muslim because of Islam, that's because I had met a good Muslim and that you know whatever. That had been my journey, some people's journeys are, they are inspired by one individual, but I hadn't been, I had been inspired by the faith and it was a very theological faith, and so the identity politics of it didn't really play out.

I became a Muslim and I took the hijab straight away and that forced me to be, I went from being a normal white person, normal white teenage girl to being a 'Paki' overnight, literally. One minute I am just normal and accepted and the next minute you are a 'Paki' and so the late 80's, it was still very much race and because I looked like a Pakistani now or I looked quite a bit like a foreigner now, that's the problems that I faced, it wasn't people's recognition of me as a Muslim, it was people thinking I was a 'Paki'.

Suterwalla: Okay so that's really interesting. An immediate reference to race, and then the experience of racism.

Joseph: Yes, it was an interesting time in the '80s. In the early '90's I attended university so this was my first engagement of study through the School of Theology and Religious Studies at Kings College in London and I was the only Muslim on the course but I met a lot of other Muslims through the Islamic Society and things like that and I think I began to see for the very first time Islam as offering social discourse, so that kind of whole social justice movement which had inspired me as a child in terms of Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, the whole slightly left of centre social justice, I found that within Muslims. Away from a cultural context because up until that point I had engaged with families who had been wonderful and welcoming and warm and caring and taking me into their houses on Ramadan and Eid and all of that, but it had been a cultural reference point.

When I went into university that whole thing was in flux and what I met was young Muslims who were British, very much British and the culture and family and the community aspect was taken away because we were on university campuses and so it was about exploring faith in a different way so I began to explore faith in terms of my Islamic faith. And always had that connection in terms of my Christian faith but through the concept of social justice and making a potential force from a contributive force within a social justice framework and that was very new.

Then I got married and I got married to a man who really just values Islam, we really hit that sense of values as opposed to our sense of culture and we explored who we were in terms of those faith values as opposed to inherited in that sense of cultural frameworks from a different place and I think...

Suterwalla: Okay, so you're sharing the values of the faith, rather than of cultural identity? Have I got that right? So are you saying that you're moving beyond the cultural values of your backgrounds, connecting through faith and creating new values for yourselves, your own cultural values now based on your faith?

Joseph: Yes, exactly. I mean...I think that I'd grown up very much, I'd been brought up, the philosophy of the lady can be anywhere and that a lady can talk to a prince and talk to a pauper. You should be able to converse with the road sweeper and you should be able to converse with the Queen with equal flair and equal sense that both people are human beings so that...I didn't really have a problem, I don't really actually have a problem attempting to speak a few words of language, to eat food, that is from a different culture. I've come from a very large family, a very noisy family, you find Asian families tend to be quite noisy and loud and big and it wasn't alien to me at all, I had grown up the youngest of five with God knows how many cousins and things like that so I had grown up in a very noisy family. The other day a lady had said to me, an elderly Bengali said to me, 'you know our ways very well'; well, they are the ways of the world, they are the ways of large families, they are the ways of politeness and morals and etiquette. These things cross continents they are not unique to a particular culture. So going back, I think, at that particular juncture which is the early 90's I realised that Islam had the potential to be a bridging identity, it was a bridging identity between the Muslim heritage of the family and the future of being British and Muslim in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Britain. So it was that sense that you are taking something of your past that you are inheriting from your family but actually you're building on that, you're bridging identity between the family, the history, the heritage and the future reality of being a Muslim in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain or being a human being in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, so you carry something of that.

Suterwalla: Now within this dialogue, I am particularly interested in your ideas about what British and Muslim identity is about. I'm particularly interested in what happens with the merging of the two, and what happens to Britishness as a result? I'd like to build from here to talk about the role of the hijab in all of this.

Joseph: I think that what you're seeing in Britain is a sense that people are exploring and if they were allowed to explore it in a slightly more natural way...but what you have is a very unnatural sense of growing up in Britain because of

the interest in being Muslim in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Britain today. There is that kind of microscope that young Muslims are under that they weren't under before. It was beginning in the '90's but not to the same degree that it is today.

Suterwalla: What was causing it in the '90's?

Joseph: I suppose, I think that a lot of people have identified it as being the post Bosnia generation. I think Bosnia was incredibly powerful in formulating a sense of coherent identity around faith. It gave rise to the post-Bosnia generation of Muslims who wanted to be politically active. My very first Bosnian that I ever met was at a mosque, blond hair, blue eyes woman in a tracksuit. I met her in the late '80's actually before Bosnia started and I said, 'Are you a convert?' And she said 'no' and I said, 'well where on earth are you from then?' She said, 'I am from Yugoslavia.' This is when Yugoslavia was still Yugoslavia and I remember being so shocked because I didn't know that there were Muslims in Yugoslavia and I think that there was that moment when you had South Asian young people see these blonde blue eyed Muslims and they were being told that they weren't converts, these people were historic, that there was a Muslim community in Europe and they were historically Muslim, they had been Muslim for hundreds and hundreds of years and that sense that these people were being persecuted, that there was the whole...couldn't get arms to them, that they were literally fighting with one hand tied behind their back. So that mixed in with Rushdie...because I think it was just that moment in time, I think what you had, you saw a series of events, you saw Rushdie, you had Rushdie, you had Bosnia and you also had life with twenty-four-hour news which hadn't existed before and then coming into the early '90's, mid '90's you had the world wide web.

All of those things, I don't think you can take one of them and say it's that, you can't just take Rushdie or Bosnia or twenty-four-hour news or satellite television, you had all of these things come together and so what you see is the situation for Muslims around the world played out minute by minute, blow by blow, it's not something that takes three weeks to arrive, it's instantaneous news that's literally played out minute by minute. All of this was coming and is coming still together, other things are coming into the mix but there was always going to be that point where young people, second generation or third generation, were going to explore that point: 'who the hell am I?' 'Who am I, where do I come from, where am I going, where do I

fit in?' And I think that they are having to do that with people asking the questions, 'do you belong. What are you first? Are you Muslim first or are you British first?' Which is the dumbest question ever, ever asked because it makes people think that there is a choice but actually in reality they are not mutually exclusive identities. As I say often I'm a woman, I'm a mother, I'm a daughter, I'm a sister, I'm an aunt, I'm an editor of a magazine, I'm a chicken keeper, I'm a Londoner, I'm a Tottenham Hotspurs supporter, you know, all of these things shape you and you are not any of these things. When I was growing up as a Christian and I would go on anti-apartheid marches, nobody said to me, 'where do you belong, what are you first?'

Suterwalla: Okay, so that's very interesting. This idea that identity is being presented in sort of atomised ways, and you don't agree with that? And also the fact that with Muslim identity under siege around the world, the impact on British youth is that, when acknowledging their own Muslim connections, they don't know how they fit? Who they are? Is that right? So are you saying that in general there's a kind of identity crisis for Muslims...young British Muslims at the moment?

Joseph: It's coming from the media and it's coming from Government.

Suterwalla: Is it coming from the communities and community leaders?

Joseph: No, I don't think so. It's coming from the elders, I think that there are people within sections which use that question actually, they are people that feel it to their advantage to create schism, to create that sense that you will never fit in, you will never be accepted...that whole use of the Quranic verse: 'they will never accept you until you believe what they believe.' This is played out when you see from the other side the concepts or the discussions on integration being such that well...it seems that the only Muslim that is acceptable is the virtual non-Muslim. So when you are drinking down the pub, or when you become a signed up member of British Society.

Suterwalla: Do you mean the acceptable Muslim is the one that fully assimilates without showing difference?

Joseph: Yes I think we have to work hard to remind people that we do live in a multicultural society, you've got Women's Institute, you've got bikers, you've got Goths, you've got chicken keepers and believe me they all have

their own worlds. As a chicken keeper I go to the 'chicken keeping poultry forum' websites. I buy *Poultry Keeper's Monthly*, do you know what I mean? It is a world where there is a conversation, you go into, there is a big café near me and all the bikers come, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them, they have their ways, you have all of these mini subcultures going on in a society, particularly in Britain, perhaps less so in somewhere like France which is much more a monolithic, homogenous, Gaullist mass if you ask me, but don't get me started on Francophile, but in Britain it's always eclectic. I grew up in the 1970's on the King's Road in the age of punk for goodness sake, people used to walk down the street with chains round their neck. I remember all sorts of extraordinary sights.

Suterwalla: But something's happened in particular with the Muslim and British Muslim identity?

Joseph: I don't get too paranoid about it; I think we are currently the new Other just like...

Suterwalla: Yes, okay, and why do you think that's happened?

Joseph: Well let's not get paranoid about it, in 1970's it was: 'No Irish, no blacks no dogs', it was if you were of a colour or you were Irish you weren't welcome. After the Birmingham pub bombings there were riots on the streets, there were protests on the streets of Birmingham calling for the repatriation of all Irish. We are in the middle of swine flu at the moment, you see the panic, let's close the schools. This and that, that kind of mob panicky chaos and panic which can possibly exist so I don't think it's specifically because we are Muslims, I think it just so happens that we are the current Other. In the 1980's it was the Afro Caribbean community and you saw the riots and you had all of those problems in...

Suterwalla: In your view how has this Othering happened?

Joseph: It happens with the drip, drip, drip. It happens with those who seek to gain, far right for example, twisting things and this becomes the new Other, the discourse becomes the, you know, the issues become extreme in the papers, tabloids. We see the headlines become 'Muslims' because it's politically impossible to talk about blacks publicly, however many hundreds of years ago it would have been the Jews. Now it just so happens that we are the Other and I think you see that dynamic in societies, that framing of the

Other and Muslims are equally as capable of prejudice like any other people. They have their senses of the Other, that sense of stereotypical, that all white women are in miniskirts out to take your men and corrupt your... it's like I don't, this type of stereotypes...and this has to be fought by all sane people...but they will always exist, there will always be that framing from a faith perspective. 'I am better than he', that sense of superiority of one thing over another creates a sense of the Other and so I don't get paranoid about it, I'm not going to bang on about Islamophobia etc. etc. It doesn't mean I am an ostrich living with my head in the ground, there are problems, there are issues but let's just recognise them for what they are and not be paranoid. That it's all about 'because we are Muslims nobody loves us, everybody hates us'. That's too much. My mum used to say nobody loves me, everybody hates me, go and eat worms, it's that little nonsense ditty.

Suterwalla: Is the issue about social cohesion? Because the veil has been a big part of that discussion with Jack Straw's comments in particular, although I know he was talking about niqab more than the hijab. But I'm referring to the principle of it.

Joseph: Oh God. I think it's about trying to build community and I think the problems that we have...

Suterwalla: Is the Islamic community always going to be the Other, is that what you mean, that there is this gulf that needs to be bridged?

Joseph: No. There will be some other poor community that will be the Other. There are fundamental differences both in the sense of time and global reach and the scale of it. I think it's very difficult to contain because of twenty four hour news, because of the web, because things can get very big, very fast, that is a difference to perhaps say the Irish or the Blacks in the '70's and the '80's. That's a difference, it can get very big, very fast, it can suddenly pull in different powers from all over that come into play. There are Muslims in streets of Tower Hamlets, that's a difference. Will it be forever? No I don't believe it will be forever because things change, because nothing stays static I think that there's... but I also believe these things will respond and they actually have, I believe the society's in flux, that is another issue...

Muslims have suffered the massive issues created by Britain being in flux. Britain is a postcolonial power searching for a purpose, it's not as if it's a

strong nation which is strong and thrusting and know what it is doing. It's thinking 'bloody hell, we are completely lost', we've got no international power, we don't have a manufacturing base anymore, we are not making anything, we have no sense of industry...the white underclass in this society has absolutely no aspiration for educational attainment. These are the issues Muslims have to deal with...because if you've got a whole situation where you've got white sink estates and white underclass that believes it has no future and no hope, no jobs, you have a ticking time bomb for the far-right and that is an issue for me. So for me it's not just about Muslims living on sink estates and nobody loves us and Islamaphobia, actually I'm far more worried about the white kids on white sink estates having no sense of educational aspiration because that is a real problem. So do I think that there will be another Other? Yes, but how long we'll be the Other for depends on what we act on and what we do now and how society changes.

Suterwalla: It's very interesting what you say about the British postcolonial crisis, to what extent do you think that that has, you've mentioned how it's contributed but to what extent do think that an anti-Muslim sentiment is about Britain fighting back, clawing back to sustain its own image?

Joseph: I don't think it's as constructive as that. I think that any nation...there's a sense of whirlwind paranoia and conspiracy theories which I think aren't of benefit to anyone. I think that what you find is that sense that a nation without confidence is a nation spiralling downwards. What we have to make sure we do is make sure that Britain of tomorrow is a nation, a confident nation and as Muslims we should be feeling that it's our duty to build that sense of confidence. Of course we can only do that if we are confident individuals ourselves.

Suterwalla: Are British Muslims buying into the British project?

Joseph: Is there a British project to buy into?

Suterwalla: Right.

Joseph: I don't think there is.

Suterwalla: Is there an Islamic project in Britain that is much more attractive? And do the two meet and cross-over?

Joseph: Is there a single Islamic project? I think that what people are searching for is vision and values and I see this time and time and time again, I see Muslims who are successful, who are literally in all of the top FTSE firms, suddenly waking up one morning and going ‘what the hell is all of this about?’ ‘I’m not selling my life to the corporate sector, I want more.’ There is that search for values in Muslims, perhaps it’s just there more to the surface than elsewhere but there is that sense that ‘hold on a minute, I’m not buying into all of this consumerism, I’m not buying into to all of this. There is elements I will buy into but actually wait a minute, I want more, I want a sense of purpose’ and I think the Muslim search for purpose is very much closer to the surface, very much closer to the surface than in other people that I’ve seen.

Suterwalla: What would you mean by that when you talk about the surface?

Joseph: It’s there, you have Muslims, they might not be particularly practising, I’m not talking about signed up hijab-wearing, praying five times a day, mosque-attending Muslims, I’m just talking about your everyday type of individual. I will give you an example. A parole officer working with young offenders and he had a group of about twenty five young people and so he is going round all of these, they’d all been in petty crimes, drug, pimping, petty thefts etc. and this was their parole work, they had to undergo a course so he said ‘this is your last day on earth, you suddenly found out that the earth was going to be destroyed, what would you do?’ Goes round the room. ‘I’d strum my guitar.’ ‘I’d get laid.’ ‘I’d get stoned.’ ‘I’d get drunk.’ Whatever, they went round, got to the Muslim and he said ‘I’d go round and I’d go and ask forgiveness off every single person that I have stolen off and that I have done this to and done that to.’ And this parole officer was in a state of complete shock, it was such an answer that was so different because he wasn’t looking for the escape, there was that sense ‘well hold on, there is an ultimate reality.’ And this was this hardened young offender, but he wasn’t so hardened that he didn’t have that sense of consciousness. Now that can be eroded, it can be eroded and I’m not saying Muslims are angels but what I found, my experience of Muslims is that they have that sense of their faith, even if it’s not activated it’s still there and they do actually believe, when you ask them ‘Do you believe in God?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Do you believe what will happen when you die?’ ‘I believe I will be judged.’ They actually do believe, that’s what’s been ingrained in them from such a young age, but there is that sense of belief that makes them question ‘Well hold on a minute where the heck is my life going here? Is this it?’ There is a church

across the road and it asks the question 'Is this it?' and I think that that question comes to Muslims very easily, they've got the car, they've got the money, they've got the house, 'Is this it?'

Suterwalla: Aside from the existential journey-making, what else does the British Muslim identity give you today?

Joseph: I don't think you can set aside that existential journey-making, I think it's fundamental and I think people ignore it within their tried sense of Darwinian social analysis or whatever analysis they attempt to put on it. They ignore that existential quality which is a fundamental driver within people. Of course there are other things, I think that is a fundamental thing, when I was doing my PhD it was about God, it was about God, that was people's journey, that was people's questions, that's what it was all about.

Suterwalla: Could I ask what your thesis was about?

Joseph: Oh it was on sociological and anthropological study of the dynamics of conversion to Islam.

Suterwalla: Oh fantastic. Is it published?

Joseph: No I never published it but I never completed it but that's what I set to do, but when I did all my fieldwork that's what it was about, it was about, it wasn't about women's place, this or that, it was about God and when you talk to young people and yeah that politics is there, this is the faith undercurrent that I suppose which I found when I very, very first embraced Islam that even with people who weren't practicing they still had that connection.

Suterwalla: I interviewed a couple of young university students who have taken the hijab and they come from south Asian backgrounds and what they said is that they actively chose to Other themselves. What do you make of that process of putting the hijab on first to Other from British society, and then finding yourself within a particular community?

Joseph: I think the hijab is very interesting as a phenomenon as why people wear it. For me, in hindsight, it was a religious ordinance for me first of all.

Suterwalla: Yes, sure, okay. How did you feel when you first put it on?

Joseph: Embarrassed.

Suterwalla: Was it a difficult decision?

Joseph: No. It was a very easy decision but that still didn't mean that I didn't feel embarrassed. When I very first put it on I felt everyone was looking at me but they weren't of course. Once I got over that couple of weeks of paranoia you realise that people just... it's not quite what you think it is. But for me it was an ordinance so therefore that was definite, it was more so on reflection and I'm not sure I was conscious of this at the time, at least in the very beginning, perhaps I was, I don't know because I remember conversations with my mum so perhaps I was conscious of it, but I'd grown up in the beauty industry, I'd grown up surrounded by people who were, no woman was shorter than 5' 8" no man was shorter than 6', everyone was a size, in those days a size eight in terms of the women and I realised how facile, how superficial that was by the age of seven or eight, I hated it with a passion that women should be judged according to what they looked like and I knew I never wanted that and so in my faith journey there was a period I wanted to be a nun and that kind of sense of simplicity. So I think that my taking on the hijab was about that search for simplicity, that search away from the body, that search away from the beauty fascism of which I'd been aware and a liberation if you like from being judged according to what I looked like and how wonderful my hair was. I don't actually want to be like everyone else, I like to be my own kind of person, separate, I want to be my own individual.

Suterwalla: Does putting the hijab on really free you from that?

Joseph: It does for me. I see it now, I see a lot of young people very conscious of how they look, I see the hijabs which are really trendy and that's a very different experience I think for a lot of younger people than it is for me and what it is for me as an individual, I only wear, very boring, I only wear white, that's because when I first became a Muslim my mother only really liked, she said 'women look better in white' because she found it so hard to accept and it was easy to accept the white one. I wore the white one until I came to such a point that the coloured ones annoy me now, but it's also part of a sense of simplicity, that searching for simplicity. But I'm not sure that that is the experience of every young person taking it on today.

Suterwalla: More generally as a commentator, what do you make of the situation with the increased visibility of the hijab on the British street in the last five years?

Joseph: You see a lot of young people they do wear it for identity, there's no doubt about it.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Joseph: I think a lot of people I've spoken to post 9/11 suddenly thought 'well who am I? Where am I? and how do I want to identify myself?' There was a lot of exploration amongst the late twenties, early thirty-something women around that juncture. I think you see the teenagers now, it's a very interesting construction, you see the little girl working in Topshop, her bangles and her skinny jeans with the layered look on top and her neck scarf and the loopy earrings outside of the scarf and you see all of that now and some people are 'That's not enough, that's not what it's all about' etc. etc. I don't believe in playing politics with women's bodies, people have got to be able to choose to wear what they darn well want quite frankly. So if I see a little fourteen year old girl, fifteen or seventeen or eighteen year old girl with her eyeliner and her dangly earrings, I'm not going to say that's not really hijab.

Suterwalla: Is there a sense of them, if the initial motivation for wearing hijab was to free yourself of the body politics, have we come full circle around all of that?

Joseph: I do feel that, there is a sense that 'well hold on a minute, here I was trying to get away from the body politics and here, twenty one years later I'm judged completely on the fact that I'm a Muslim and I wear a scarf', that irks me, I'm not saying it doesn't, I'm not eighteen anymore, I'm thirty-eight and that sense that it's just hard work but there is still part of me, because I believe it's an ordinance from God, it's a part of my faith and it's part of who I am so I didn't put it on for anybody, I'm not going to take it off for anybody. But yes, I do feel sometimes really of being judged, 'you're the first person in a scarf I've ever spoken to' type of conversation, which for me is like 'Oh right, I've had this conversation 55,000 times before' type of thing, but it's new for them and constantly having to be polite in a sense that this is new for them.

- Suterwalla: What do you make of the, it's impact on identity politics more generally then?
- Joseph: For me it's, I just wish people would get over it. It's a piece of cloth, just get over it; I wear it, you don't, no big deal.
- Suterwalla: If you feel it is that inconsequential why do women actively adopt it as a way of Othering themselves?
- Joseph: Yeah it's a driver for some, it was certainly not my driver, it's not the driver for many women I know but then it is for many others. I think that there are so many drivers for why women wear it, just as individual as women are themselves, so I'm not sure you can just create 'here is the blanket' and they are trying to Other themselves, well that's my thesis, but then again that is happening and so it's complex. It's about when I was at school my two friends had a duffle coat and I wanted a duffle coat, my mum wouldn't buy me one because she didn't like duffle coats but there was that kind of thing about having a duffle coat. And I think in a school situation you know your friend's wearing it, yeah that plays a part and you get to women who are in the university and they are going through faith exploration and they take it on. Then you get to women who are in their thirties, late thirties, they've had their kids and they wear it and their husband doesn't want them to wear it but they are going on a spiritual journey. Everybody, there is as many reasons as there are individuals, there is all sorts going on, there's the teenagers who is it's part and parcel of her family culture.
- Suterwalla: What would be your comment on the way that Muslims are represented in the British press etc. and what do you make of the debates that have become very public around the veil and what kind of impact do you think that that's going to have?
- Joseph: I think for me I just, the idea that politics is played out on women's bodies is something I strongly stand against so whether it was on the streets of Tehran or the streets of Paris, I think women have to be allowed to wear what they want to wear, you can't force a code on women on the streets of Tehran and you can't force a code on the women in the streets of Paris and actually they are both cut of the same cloth, both attempts to either force women to wear it or force women out of it are both forcing women to do something against their will and I will stand against that regardless. It has to be choice. I believe fundamentally and theologically that human beings are created to be

free choice and if you take away, that free choice, then you take away any validity of their action. There can be no validity in a woman choosing to do something because she is demanded to by government, either extremist, Islamic government or extremist secularist government. Secular extremism is just as dangerous to our world as any religious extremes and so I will stand against that. When Jack made his comments, look you are a fifty-something, middle-aged male and you feel uncomfortable with a woman that covers her face, get over it. He should know better and that's why I just, Sarkozy, first time a French president made a speech to the parliament in one hundred and fifty years, does he have nothing better to talk about than that kind of populist politics? That's what I find so totally objectionable.

Suterwalla: Do you think it is populism that they were striving for?

Joseph: With Jack I'm not so sure, I actually think he probably actually in some dopey way actually found he had issues with it. Sarkozy I do believe that he is just striving for populism yes. With Jack I'm not so sure, I'm not cynical by nature, I do try not to be cynical but I just find that there is a lot of populism in terms of politics in relation to Islam and it's an easy vote winner, very easy vote winner and I think...

Suterwalla: Why is it so scary?

Joseph: Why is that scary? Why is Islam so scary? It's because it is scary isn't it? It's very... unless you know a woman, unless you've spoken to somebody most people have never engaged with us I suppose, so they're not human beings, they are two dimensional cardboard cut-out characters. If you've never, ever met someone, if you have never interacted, engaged, talked to, of course it's scary. That's why the engagement is so important.

Suterwalla: Communities that are living in Bradford etc. is it, how do you think that's going to play out?

Joseph: I do believe it's our fundamental obligation as Muslims to engage with human beings as human beings and regardless of faith and we need to be contributing to society at all levels regardless of faith. Perhaps faith is what drives us but you don't always have to publicly bring that to the table. I'm caught up in a generation because of who I am and because of what I do but you don't always have to contribute as a Muslim, you don't always have to wear, even if you are wearing your scarf on your head you don't always

have to wear it on your sleeve. I do believe that we should be contributing our values because, I went to Prince Charles' Dimpleby lecture called 'Facing the Future' and he outlined profound problems with our world today which Muslims are equally contributing to. We're driving the cars, we're putting on the computers, we're there with our iPhones and our iPods and everything else and all the gadgets, we are adding to the issues that we are profoundly facing as a world today and I do believe that Islam has something to contribute, that it has something of value to offer. We don't have to necessarily have to offer that publicly as...but we need to join hands and join up, it's a much more value-driven call for the future.

That's what I'm doing with *emel*, because this is a project which has set its roots to create confidence amongst Muslims. Because what I would say is you can't define this off according to what you're against, you can't just say 'Oh we are anti-violence, anti-extremism, anti-terrorism, because when these things pass, as they will, because all things must come to pass, when these things are past, what are you for? What do you stand for? What are you giving? You can't justify yourself in the negative, it's like you can't say I'm anti-America or anti-Israel, what are you for? And I think that that's what Muslims need to formulate, they need to recognise that we, I do believe that we need to recognise we are stakeholders in Europe, that we have the potential to be stakeholders in our future.

Suterwalla: So is that what is shaping your editorial direction with *emel*?

Joseph: Yes, when we were created *emel* back in 2003 I think people thought that it couldn't be done, what were we doing? We created the first issue there was that sense of 'you'll never create a second', when we went monthly in 2005, 'you won't find enough stories'.

Suterwalla: And you call yourselves a lifestyle magazine, what does that mean to you?

Joseph: Because for a number of reasons I suppose, ultimately because Islam is a whole way of life, a holistic way of life, but it's not just about scarves and prayers, there really, really isn't just about religious dogma or international politics, it's about every aspect of your life that you should look to yourselves.

Suterwalla: And something that I picked up very much from the issues that I've seen, there is a huge amount of integrative, a sense of integration that's happening

through what you are doing and what you are trying to project, was that a very important part of your vision?

Joseph: Yes because it is about the integrated vision, the integrated vision of self. If you feel integrated internally, you've integrated your faith and your culture into your being, if you feel self-aware and self-confident then you will contribute that. If you feel schismatic inside yourself, if you can't work out who the hell you are, if you can't work out what you are doing from one moment to another, which part of you you want to put to the fore or not, what are you going to contribute? And so I think it is very much about creating self-aware, self-confident individuals and putting that forward so that you can contribute that and at the end of the day...it's a whole journey to be fully integrated and I don't mean integrated into British society in the terms politically used, I mean integrated as a person. You need to be self-aware but not self-conscious, you need to be confident of what you are and that's in every sphere of your life and it's having that absolute confidence that allows ultimately your ability to contribute, to have that sense of generative power. So we're trying to express that confidence. Celebrities are vacuous, who is driving this? Who is going to give people that sense of self-awareness and identity?

Suterwalla: So *emel* came about through that, were you feeling that when you created the magazine?

Joseph: I think we just wanted to show that you can't keep reacting, after 2000 when my husband and I spent a year on the road reacting.

Suterwalla: In what way?

Joseph: From CNN to Sky to the BBC to synagogues, the church halls, to school boards to methodist centres to Quaker hall meetings.

Suterwalla: And what were you talking about?

Joseph: Talking about Islam, talking about normality, this is not in our name, this is not part of our faith, this is not part of Islam etc. You can't keep doing that, it sucks you dry and it does nothing, it contributes nothing. Okay you make people aware, you've normalised yourself on a one-to-one but ultimately you are just reacting and fire fighting. What I can control is my own sense of self and sense to inspire others to get control and take control of their

own sense of self, to contribute. So that's what we need to do in terms of regaining a sense of future and destiny. That's what we're trying to do here.

Suterwalla: So is it, to put it simplistically, to give a positive representation of Islam as something modern and contemporary and integrative?

Joseph: Who is going to flag up the Muslim artist? Who is going to flag up interfaith work, who is going to flag up some lady from Birmingham... some young boy from Bradford, who is going to flag these people up? They are not headline news. Sometimes though when we flag a story up it does get picked up, and that's great news. I just feel that there is so much more to be done, I think it has created the concept of Muslim lifestyle and allowed Muslims to think outside of themselves and problems.

Suterwalla: It allows other people to read and understand and feel, not feel completely threatened or alienated. Is that important to you?

Joseph: I think we try and be a bridge to our Muslim community outwards to people of other faiths and that's been very, very successful to allow people to see a window into the Muslim community, to normalise the image of Muslims, to just see Muslims as normal human beings. Yes I think we've been very fortunate in that particular bridge of engagement, we've reached out to the Muslim world I think and shown that we are not all down trodden Muslims living in Britain today because that's an awful thing, an image to project.

Suterwalla: I'd be really grateful if I could have a look at some back issues and go through them?

Joseph: There is some good stuff, there really is. We're just beginning our sixtieth issue now.

Suterwalla: Oh congratulations. Thank you so much, it's been so interesting speaking with you. Can we move on to the back issues now?

[Joseph takes Suterwalla to the archive section of the office].

END

## **Annika Waheed**

Interview date: 20 July 2009.

Location: café, Swiss Cottage, London.

Duration of interview: 40 minutes.

Start

Suterwalla: Okay well could you start by describing to me what kind of family background you come from and what the women in your family have worn traditionally? Then we can talk about when you started to wear hijab and why?

Waheed: Okay. I probably would say that from a cultural background, the family was quite traditional up until my parents divorced.

Suterwalla: So for the audio, I'm just clarifying that you are from a Pakistani background, right?

Waheed: Yeah I'm from a Pakistani background. Both my parents originate from Pakistan.

Suterwalla: But you were born in Britain?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: And your parents were born in Pakistan? Sorry your parents were born in Pakistan?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: And when did they come over here?

Waheed: Okay, my dad came over I think, possibly around the 1970s, or 19- around 19-, late 1960s early 1970s.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: And my mum came over in the...in early 1980s.

Suterwalla: When she got married to him was that?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: Right so then you were born in 1984?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: And do you have any other siblings?

Waheed: Yes I have two other siblings who came straight after, about two and a half years. Because there's like two and a half years between all of us...gaps.

Suterwalla: And so what would your mum have worn or what does she still wear?

Waheed: My mum's quite a modern woman actually. She, even though she's from back home she doesn't cover up and she's a teacher also and she began teaching IT from quite a young age. So I think and believe she started college about three years after I was born.

Suterwalla: I see, and so she works and -

Waheed: And then from there she just worked her way to the top to be honest.

Suterwalla: That's great.

Waheed: And she's never dressed like modestly. She never covered, so she never wore the hijab, she never had to wear anything. She wasn't traditional. Shalwar kameez. That was as far as it went really.

Suterwalla: Did she ever wear jeans or like western trousers and tops? Or dresses, skirts?

Waheed: Oh no. Because we originally used to live in Whitechapel in East London, which is a predominantly Bengali or Pakistani area and the people at the college were actually...all South Asian really or from an ethnic background. My mum used to wear the traditional shalwar kameez to work.

Suterwalla: Yeah with the dupatta [long scarf] just round her shoulders or neck?

Waheed: Just with...she'd wear like a shawl over, as normal. Which was just a part of the dress.

Suterwalla: Yeah, yeah. Okay. So she would wear that...and -

Waheed: But she would, she was quite trendy in her ways. She was, she would wear the bright...you know not the conventional stuff, she would wear the bright stuff, match her shoes and all the rest of it. She would go looking very presentable. She was very proud of her appearance.

Suterwalla: Yeah, sure. And would she wear make-up and stuff like that?

Waheed: Yeah yeah she would.

Suterwalla: So how about you when you were growing up at home? You know what were the expectations and what kind of stuff did you wear?

Waheed: There weren't really any expectations. We did, actually I tell a lie, there was an expectation of us to wear the traditional dress of shalwar kameez at home from my dad. So up until my parents divorced which was say about when I was thirteen it was kind of...you were obliged to wear shalwar kazmeez at home. You had to wear it.

Suterwalla: Right, right. All the time?

Waheed: Well certainly to certain events even outside, family gatherings or going to see family friends. You had to wear shalwar kameez even though we didn't want to. That wasn't just for my father's side, also when we...because we travelled quite a lot as a family. My mum's brother who we used to visit quite a lot who lived in Denmark. When we'd have to go there we'd, over the summer holiday do things like that, during the six weeks holiday when we did go and stay with him, we were again obliged to wear shalwar kameez and I remember we didn't really want to and we hated it.

Suterwalla: Right. You didn't like it, you didn't want to? You say you hated it...

Waheed: With passion.

Suterwalla: Okay, why was that?

Waheed: We'd say, 'Do I have to do this?' We still had to do it. But we did it because you know we were at that age when you obey your parents, you listen to them. But after when my parents divorced we were our own people, I was my own person. No one told me what to do, basically I had the freedom to do and wear what I wanted. My mum wouldn't dictate to us and say to us that we have to wear shalwar kameez or anything, unless we were going to Europe to see her brother or anything. But other than that you know we weren't, we had the freedom to wear what we want.

Suterwalla: So what kind of stuff did you wear then? Do you include all western dress in that? All the mainstream fashions?

Waheed: Oh it was just the normal like- we were all going through the teenage phase so you know the tracksuit and the jeans and everything, not provocative- we was always covered, we were always dressed modestly. Even though it wasn't drummed into us that you always have to cover or wear something which covered you, it was just something natural within all, with myself and my siblings, to always cover.

Suterwalla: Where do you think those values were coming from? Was it because of the general culture around dress for women from your Pakistani background?

Waheed: Yeah, totally, I mean that's how it is, you are modest. So out of respect as well. We wouldn't go in front of my dad without having a shawl over ourselves or anything like that. It was just something that came, it was like second nature for us.

Suterwalla: Okay. So modesty, and covering certain parts of the body with a shawl was important?

Waheed: Yeah, and the same applied to the clothes that we would wear in public and even when we went to school. My uniform, my school uniform was actually that we had to wear quite a short skirt. Now everyone would roll their skirt up quite high when they got to school and things like that whereas I wasn't comfortable with that, I myself would wear it quite to the knees. Not because you know it could have been of insecurity from...going from your hormones and things like that when you're at a teenage phase but it wasn't something that used to always sit comfortably with me, so wearing

something which was quite either provocative or you'd see your flesh and things like that. I wasn't comfortable with it.

Suterwalla: Would you wear jeans and a t-shirt and sweatshirt or something you know like that?

Waheed: Yeah, yeah tracksuit, jeans you name it I was a tomboy when I was quite young so...

Suterwalla: Oh yeah. Okay, so jeans and...and would you have worn make-up?

Waheed: No funnily enough I didn't. I didn't start wearing make-up until I was about seventeen.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: I think because I've always had this struggle of identity, identifying myself with being with my peers, with certain groups and things like that. You know I've had quite a transitional change over the past say five to six years where I could identify with something or someone, or a group or something like that. But prior to that none whatsoever I was just a bit wild doing my own things, trying to find myself and who I was as a person.

Suterwalla: So is it fair you felt quite lost, is that what you mean? Can you talk more about that?

Waheed: I went to college. At first I had my school, I finished school and did my GCSEs and went to college. I think the fact that - - I would like to add the fact that if my dad was still influencing our lives or was like dominant you know the protector and all the rest of it in the family, I think to this day I would probably have to wear traditional dress.

Suterwalla: Shalwar kameez?

Waheed: Yeah. We still have to wear shalwar kameez. We still have to listen to him say what, like listen to what he wants and all the rest of it. But whereas my parents separated and we became our own people both my mum and dad could not tell us what to do. We became our own people. However when I went into...

Suterwalla: That must have been a huge change for you?

Waheed: It was I think I was quite confused to be honest. I was quite confused up to the age of about twenty-one and twenty-two.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: Because I was just quite a lost soul. I really didn't know what I wanted in my...like I went through university, did all my own things. I changed my degree about three times. I initially started with law, which mum really wanted me to do.

Suterwalla: Right, I see, and then what happened...

Waheed: And I was like 'No I don't want to do it' but just for the sake of pleasing my mum I said 'Fine I'll do it'. I did it, hated it for a year because I wasn't mentally there. I wasn't...

Suterwalla: You weren't engaged with it?

Waheed: I just really I couldn't really knuckle down in pure academic, I just wasn't ready. I wasn't...like I said I was a tom, tom kid, tomboy I'd be out playing basketball with the boys and things like that. That was me.

Suterwalla: So you didn't separate yourself I mean from your background there wasn't a harsh separation of the sexes in terms of you said you played basketball with the boys. You...obviously you had friends who were male?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: That you hung out with? So that was okay?

Waheed: I've always...I've always had male friends from the start because I don't know I was just that kind of person who connected more with the boys than I did with the girls.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: And my dad wasn't in our life for about a good, I think good six, seven, eight years he wasn't there so I had the freedom you know. I didn't have

someone who'd be looking and checking up on me or anything like that to keep an eye on me.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: With...to an extent that I did have a relationship with my mum where my mum knew and she knew anyway. The thing is the college where...the college like I went to my mum was teaching there.

Suterwalla: Oh right okay.

Waheed: So my mum and the coincidence of the basketball court being right next to her window where she could see me through her office. I was just there. So you know she could see what I was doing.

Suterwalla: So no excuses could work?!

Waheed: Yeah you know she knew and I'd introduced my guy friends to my mum 'Oh mum this is so and so. This is so and so.' So she was perfectly aware and she did know that I wasn't interested in boys in that way because she'd, to an extent, she knew I was quite insecure.

Suterwalla: Right.

Waheed: So I wouldn't really pursue a relationship per se or if a guy did show an interest in me she'd just know that I'd climb for the hills.

Suterwalla: Right. So there wasn't a conflict there? Is this because it would not have been acceptable for you to have a boyfriend, because of your background?

Waheed: Yes, exactly. Oh my God! She saw that there were guys who would try it but I just completely stopped talking to them, listen to myself and what have you. So she did trust me to an extent to say 'Oh right you know what she's got a good head on her shoulders I trust her enough not to get into a relationship', which wasn't typical within you know south Asian background communities and families, you just know you don't have a boyfriend, you just don't do that.

Suterwalla: Okay so that's a real taboo. I mean I know that because of course it's really similar with the values around me coming from an Indian background. But I

wanted to clarify that with you rather than assume that I understood, or that it was the same as what I knew. So anyway, what kind of community would you have been described as coming from? Like what part of Pakistan had your family come from and were they part of the educated classes, were they...? You know because all of these things makes...has such an impact when you take the migration trail.

Waheed: Yeah absolutely they do. We're from Punjab so, both my parents mum and dad were from Punjab. But the thing is we're from an educated background and my granddad was a headmaster of a school, my mum's dad. And they're both, they're both in the Punjab but the thing is Punjab was the main district for like all...some smaller towns in Pakistan or something. There's a lot of import and exporting going there and...my dad came from quite a high class background because we did a lot of importing and exporting in leather goods so we had...making footballs. So all the footballs, leather footballs that would be globally distributed to like Lions and things like that was from our family.

Suterwalla: Wow, so that must have been quite a significant business, and profitable!

Waheed: Yeah, exactly, so they know, my dad was proud and still is very proud of his family.

Suterwalla: Yes, of course.

Waheed: He loved the name you know as within the classes he would call himself by his family name and all that and you know in a very, very proud, very arrogant and to an extent I feel like he puts his Pakistani identity before his religion, which me and him clash a lot on.

Suterwalla: I see, so do you mean that for him his cultural identity and his roots are stronger than his religious identity? You're nodding, so can I ask then, leading on from that, and I ask this within the context of how south Asian cultures sometimes work: did you feel that his control over your dress was about his control over you and your body, where your body in a way was the site to uphold his values? So you were like, for example, embodying his traditions, his history, his legacy while you were here? Sorry, that's a longwinded way of putting it...

Waheed: Yeah, yeah absolutely, no you've totally got it because the thing is, the things that I found because I know as cheesy as it sounds or as clichéd as it sounds my journey of to where I've got to today is in some ways based around you know having my own identity and being free to express my own identity not someone else's.

Suterwalla: Right, okay.

Waheed: I have realised that a lot, not all, I'm not kind of...tar everyone with the same brush but the majority of men from a Pakistani background have an element of control. And the thing is the only way that they can implement their control is if they can, they put upon the family, what they put upon their wife. The things that they implement on their children. You know the cultural aspect.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Waheed: And the thing is where I'm grown up now culture is something that I do value but I value my religion first, sorry.

Suterwalla: You mean your Pakistani heritage? Is that what you mean by culture?

Waheed: Yes well the heritage aspect you know it's like the family that you're from and you know who you are and what you've done and the history aspect of it, right. I will never deny that but then there's more cultural things that you know can be misinterpreted for religion.

Suterwalla: Oh I see, okay, so you are separating the two very distinctly.

Waheed: Now that is where I ensure there's a stop to it because I cannot mix culture and religion together. I don't pick and choose. You can't do a combination.

Suterwalla: What do you mean by that?

Waheed: Because the thing is a lot of these men do unfortunately misinterpret culture for religion. A prime example when...for example where in the Quran do the men state 'No if I tell my wife to wear hijab she has to wear it?' It's not saying that, it doesn't say that at all. But the thing is culturally they've got to, because they're the man of the house and they are a husband, they have to you know they impose that upon a woman. No the Quran clearly says that

it is a woman's right, yes it is incumbent for a woman to cover and dress modestly however a man cannot dictate to you. And if your husband does, for example I think what it is he has to be able to be...to ensure that he's fulfilling all his obligations as a husband to his wife before he can make the request of asking her to dress modestly. It's not as simple as 'I told you to do it. You've better to do it'. Which is a cultural thing. That's a cultural thing because the women unfortunately from back home they do not stand up for themselves, they're quite docile, they're submissive and they'll just do as they're told.

Suterwalla: Okay, I see, so is it different for you because you're born here?

Waheed: Yeah because being here in this country we've...we've found our own identity, we've established...we've got the differentiation between what culture is, what religion is, what tradition is and even heritage. You know they're completely different things.

Suterwalla: Okay I think I understand, so can I take you back to your story, you said that after your parents' divorce you've worn high street stuff that could be termed as western, is that fair?

Waheed: Well I was still living in tracksuits until I was in uni.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Waheed: I was still...like I think up until my first year of uni. I hated it. I didn't like the girls. You know there was like, I had different peers and the thing is I made friends with everyone. I'm a friendly person I get on with everyone so some people from the Nigerian lot, the Nigerian millionaires from...you know in the Law Society to the silly girls who would throw themselves at guys in the bar. I actually knew everyone.

Suterwalla: Which university were you at?

Waheed: Middlesex.

Suterwalla: Oh right, yeah.

Waheed: So over there well I didn't particularly...I couldn't tell you I couldn't relate to anybody there because there was so many different groups you know

you'd see the girls who would be getting drunk, throwing themselves at guys, flirting, giggling and I'd just look at them and think 'Haven't you got any self respect for yourself?'

Suterwalla: Right.

Waheed: You know sort of from, I am I feel like yes I am quite a feminist. I don't believe in a woman having to you know sell her body or show off her body or all the rest of it to be able to get a man like. So I think that was something that did trigger something off in me to think 'Why they doing that?' The thing is I may have had close contact with guys but the thing is see most girls do mature a lot more, a lot quicker than guys do.

Suterwalla: Had you, in terms of what you've said about being a feminist, had you...how much did you feel that you sort of had taken ideas from the official feminist movement of the west like the Women's Liberation Movement for example? Did you feel like any of the ideas more formally projected through those kinds of organisations had influenced you at that age or at that time? Or was it that you felt that you were a feminist because you felt that that was the mainstream ideas of mainstream culture?

Waheed: I think it was the mainstream ideology of feminism. So I wouldn't say that I, I was following any group per se. You know I've never known of any and I don't really think, I don't really look into that. But I think it was just the whole ideology of 'sisters stick together. Don't get messed around by guys.' You know just from the mainstream. You know having just self-respect for yourselves.

Suterwalla: Would that have come then do you think more from the west and the mainstream sense of women's emancipation or was that coming from your Pakistani background?

Waheed: I think I felt that strongly because of what I'd seen as part of my patriarchal Pakistani background because where I would see my parents arguing, the arguments that my dad would use and things like that and I was like 'Whoah, whoah' you know I might have been quite young but I was able to differentiate between their arguments and just say 'He's just talking crap.'

Suterwalla: Why was that? Do you mean he was saying things to your mum about being a woman that you didn't agree with?

Waheed: And the thing is like accusations... I think the terminology of feminism came to me first, through my dad. As ironic as that sounds because my dad, you know he would say stuff about a woman's role that was just, totally off. He accused her of being a feminist because she wanted to be a working woman and fight for the custody for us kids and all the rest of it. But he'd say 'She's not a typical woman she's just a feminist.'

Suterwalla: Ah, I see, okay, so for him that kind of emancipation meant you weren't a typical woman?

Waheed: Yeah, and at that point in time the whole, you know that was set in my mind I was like 'Okay. So if you want to take care of your kids and if you want to work but you don't want to depend on a man you become a feminist.' And I said 'Do you know what I don't see there's anything wrong with it. So be it I'm a feminist.'

Suterwalla: That's really interesting isn't it? How these different definitions change and get layered into each other depending on where you're from and what you experience around you.

Waheed: Yeah and that was at quite a young age. That was like from when I was about thirteen.

Suterwalla: Right.

Waheed: And you know this whole feminist, feminism I don't really think many thirteen year olds know what that is.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: But if you use the term 'sisterhood' they'll get it straight away.

Suterwalla: Ah, what do you mean? 'Sisterhood in what way?'

Waheed: You know they'll understand that but the thing with the whole feminism you know some still have their own definition or their own interpretation of what it is. But to me it just, it does come back to sisterhood, you know girls stick together and do your own thing and having no dependency upon a man. It's girl power.

Suterwalla: Is that how you feel about it?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: Okay, so I'm now understanding what you mean when you say feminism. Because I think it differs from generation to generation so it's important to be clear. So that's how you were thinking about girl power. When you get, when you...you were saying that you were going through a journey at university and you were very self aware about the fact that you were feeling lost in terms of finding your identity and not being able to associate with groups. Can we go back to that and talk about that some more?

Waheed: I think basically I've had a group of friends since an early age and I've literally grown up with them for about a good eight or nine years. One of them went to Pakistan and she came back and she was quite practising herself and they're all Pakistani. And one of them particularly was quite practising, she was quite in her own way, and she was quite steadfast, you know in her religion. So...and I really admire her and be like 'Yeah, yeah she's a good one' and I would always say to myself 'Oh you know one day God willing I do want to wear the hijab when I get married.'

Suterwalla: Oh okay so you saw your friends start to wear hijab, is that what you mean? That after they came back some of them were wearing it and it made you think?

Waheed: Yeah I mean my friend she was quite steadfast. By she would pray regularly, whilst none of us prayed. The only time we prayed was during Ramadan, at Eid, even that, you know if were doing...if someone was really pushing for it. Because the thing is we didn't, I didn't come from a practising background so my interpretation of what Islam is was you fast through Ramadan, you listen to your parents, there is one God, the prophet is Prophet Mohammed is our last prophet. And that was, that's as far as it went.

Suterwalla: Right so although there was all this cultural, all these cultural kind of proscriptions put on you they weren't coming from the theological side.

Waheed: No, no. I wasn't aware of it and I didn't understand my religion whatsoever. I didn't have any, any understanding of it.

Suterwalla: Right, okay.

Waheed: The thing is I would go and see my dad go, pray, do prayers on Friday and see him do that much and I'd be like 'Okay so I know that it's obligatory for a man to go pray on Friday. Okay he went in, like well done.' And we learnt the Quran from a young age. My mum taught us, my mum's aunt, my mum's sister came and lived with us for a little while, while my mum was working and she took care of us for a bit. And she taught me how to read the Quran. It was like the Quran but again it wasn't the way I should've learnt it. You know I'm grateful that she taught me what I know and I learnt how to pray but the thing is like it had no meaning it was just you know a ritual, 'Yeah I'm doing it because there's a place to do it. Because God tells us to do it.'

Suterwalla: So it was part of what you were expected to do. That was it. Is that right?

Waheed: There was no spiritual understanding or meaning for it. It was something I had to do. So...that was just my understanding of religion. I had no, I didn't know anything else about religion. I've always had an interest in it and when I was about fourteen in school I did kind of go to...there was these...Because I used to...all my peers were quite older than me so I might have been in Year 8, in about Year 9 but I used to hang around with people who were in the sixth form. They were the only people like I feel like I could relate to and could understand me because everyone else was just immature geeks.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: And they were quite practising they would go to talks, they would pray regularly. They'd do all this. So I start-, I began to have some kind of understanding for what Islam is, and also some other kind of identity, what you know what does it mean, what we're supposed to do and you know I got some grounding. I was bound to have some grounding but then I came away from it. My teenage rebellion years started. I completely rebelled and did the opposite of what you're supposed to do.

Suterwalla: So when you say rebellion what kind of stuff?

Waheed: I think you know row with my mum, not listening to her. Just wanting to go out. It wasn't the freedom aspect of it, it was just...

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: I just didn't want to be tied down and that's still the same with me to this day. I don't want to be tied down, I don't want anyone telling me what to do.

Suterwalla: So it wasn't about alcohol and drugs and stuff?

Waheed: No, never, never. Never went there.

Suterwalla: Right, okay.

Waheed: I have to say that I have no interest in it. Like a few of my peers and that they smoked but I never smoked. I had no interest at that point nothing. I didn't want to drink, I never smoked, never drank. Nothing, like no clubbing nothing, it was nothing like that. I think the worst I was doing was probably staying out until about eleven watching a movie.

Suterwalla: Right okay okay.

Waheed: But the thing is even then that was quite hard for my mum to accept because a girl doesn't do that. A girl doesn't stay out late because she's supposed to be home by like nine o'clock. I was like 'It's my school holidays I've just finished my GCSEs. Cut me slack I'm going out', literally and you know you start having the rows and all the rest of it. So those were teenage rebellion years for me. I did what I wanted and my... what I... which was just going out gallivanting. That's all it was.

Suterwalla: And then, so your friend goes to Pakistan and she comes back much more... What happened with...

Waheed: And she's like covering.

Suterwalla: No describe to me what you mean by covering?

Waheed: She started wearing the hijab.

Suterwalla: So how do you define that because you know as you know there's so many different kind of ways to wear it and...?

Waheed: There is just one standard way unless you're wearing the headscarf the African way.

Suterwalla: So do you mean she was wearing a headscarf with an abaya? Or...

Waheed: No, no, no she was just wearing a proper headscarf. Her neck was covered everything, her front was covered.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Waheed: The definition of hijab is to be...have your hair covered and your bosom covered. That is what...how we've been told to cover. So...for me if someone is wearing their headscarf and their bandana where you can see any hair, that's not a headscarf for me.

Suterwalla: Yeah because this is interesting right because obviously now in London you see so many different types of ways of wearing what people call hijab. So...

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: But anyway we...let me just come back to your friend. So she came back and she was wearing hijab in a way where she was covering all of her hair, covering her bosom and then wearing western clothes with it?

Waheed: Yeah, yeah. She just...she was quite trendy. She was always the one who would always match her shoes and her bag to the extent of her folders that she would take to college. We'd call her...I used to call her Mary Poppins because she was just perfect in every way. So you know when she started wearing the hijab like it would be normal jeans, like kaftan tops in the summer. You know she was always very very trendy.

Suterwalla: Yeah. And how did you feel when you saw her?

Waheed: It was western clothes with a hijab.

Suterwalla: Yeah. How did you feel when you saw her?

Waheed: I was really proud of her because I was like ‘Wow you know she’s taken that step for herself’, you know to cover your hair and I was like ‘Wow!’ I was really really pro-, I really admired her for it.

Suterwalla: And where did that take you personally?

Waheed: Personally I was just like ‘Yeah one day. One day that’ll be me. When I’m married. And now obviously I don’t know when I’ll get married I’ll do that.’

Suterwalla: Why was it important to do it when you got married?

Waheed: I don’t know, I just thought I’d be ready then, strong enough then to do something like that because I’d have my identity. So then after that, that was when we kind of when we were at uni but actually one thing that also that did really annoy me when I was at uni - I’ve always had like really long curly hair and it was just the focus point for every guy. You know I will be going somewhere and it would be ‘Oh your hair’s so nice.’

Suterwalla: Yes.

Waheed: I was like ‘Is that what defines me? Is that how you just look at me?’ It’s something like...I came to the conclusion that, you know, guys just hit on something which is aesthetically pleasing for them. Nothing, not for my thoughts or my achievements, my opinions, nothing like that, it was just ‘She’s hot!’...it was getting quite tiresome...I just couldn’t take it any more. I really, really had had enough.

Suterwalla: Lots of male looking and attention...?

Waheed: And I just couldn’t take it anymore I really, really had enough, it was just...I just hated it. I really really hated it. I hated being just like ‘Oh the girl with the curly hair. Oh it’s the girl with the curly hair. Oh that girl with the curly hair.’ ‘Oh God I have a name!’ So that was...I think it was just the final straw. After the first year then someone... I had a really close guy friend of mine and he actually wanted to come round and ask for my hand in marriage and I was close to him as a friend, he was still kind of growing on me. I fainted I just couldn’t believe it. But he said ‘Yeah okay you know I do want to come round.’ So I was like ‘Yeah alright. I’ll see how it goes.’ And I had an argument with him once, he said to me ‘Why don’t you wear a hijab?’ and I was going ‘Who on earth are you to tell me why don’t I wear

the hijab. I'll wear the hijab when I'm good and ready. Don't tell me what to do.'

Suterwalla: So was it a big point of discussion between you and your friends at university?

Waheed: No I was quite quiet at uni. I didn't like talking to anyone. I was friendly but I think if someone started to get too personal then you just take a step back and just observe and take everything...

Suterwalla: But did you feel that people were really conscious about it or that they felt every-, your Muslim friends were thinking, 'Will I? Won't I? Will I? Won't I?' Were the guys saying, 'You should...you shouldn't? You should...you shouldn't?'

Waheed: The thing is like they could've been in the, in some places, like in the Islamic Society but the thing is I never went there. I didn't even know it existed. I didn't get into all that at uni. I mean from the Law Society do you know there were debates and stuff where I'd go and have a few debates but that was about it. You know with that guy who said, 'wear hijab', he didn't actually say to me 'well you need to wear it', I think it was something where I got really annoyed and I said, 'that stupid man at work just hit on me', or something and he was just like, 'Yeah well you know that wouldn't happen if you wore hijab.' And I was like, 'Yeah so....' I was like, 'A woman should have the right to wear what she wants and be how she is without a man having to hit on her. You know why does a woman need to be covered up to be able to ensure that a man doesn't hit on you.'

Suterwalla: I see.

Waheed: But he said, 'But you realise that a man's weakness is a woman and if she's beautiful and she's attractive and things like that a man/men will approach her. Whereas if you are dressed modestly or your hair is covered a lot of your beauty is not, is not on display and he will respect you a lot more.'

Suterwalla: What do you think about that?

Waheed: Well I think, obviously back then I argued with him until I was blue in the face and told him to get lost. But I actually...yes I do actually, I do endorse that theory. I do believe in it.

Suterwalla: Right, okay.

Waheed: And from there when I had that row with him and told him to get lost it started me thinking. God I was like, 'Do you know what....' Not that I was going to admit to him that he was right. I was just thinking maybe he's got a point so I'm thinking, thinking, thinking: 'Shall I start wearing the hijab? Shall I start wearing the hijab?' And the thing is a lot of people that...the girl my friend who's like pregnant, who started covering first she had quite a righteous attitude to her. You know she would kind of look down upon people and she would judge you. She was just a bitch, you know girly bitchy, she was just very judgemental, 'Oh look at her she needs to lose a few pounds', kind of thing. Which kind of contradicts the whole practising role that you do within yourself.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: But the first person I told, like I asked a few of my peers at work who I actually go to uni with as well, 'Oh do you think? What do you think if I wore the hijab?'

Suterwalla: So your friends...these were Muslim friends?

Waheed: Muslim and white. I had Muslim and white, like all kinds, Asian, Sikh, white, I had a whole mixture, diverse background of peers and when I mentioned to the white girls for example, 'I'm thinking of wearing the hijab'... now I used to work in Romford which was predominantly white area.

Suterwalla: Yeah.

Waheed: It's the heart of Essex. Now over there when I said that to them they were like 'Oh no!' 'Why?', 'Your curly hair.' I was like, 'You know what that is what I didn't want to hear.' That would be the exact thing that I didn't want to hear, 'What about your curly hair?' I said, 'Because that's what defining me. Okay it's the first thing that everyone looks at, my curly hair. I'm sick to death of it.' And when they heard that they were like, 'Yeah you've got a point. But it's so nice and blah blah blah', and I was like... And that's when it really started. I think I'd already made my mind up then. I was like, 'Do you know what I'm going to wear it!' I just needed some encouragement.

That's all it was. They're all like 'Okay'. I went to my friend who covers and said to her, 'Maddia, I'm thinking of wearing the hijab.' It took her about three hours just for her to be able to... for it to sink in and comprehend what I've just said.

Suterwalla: So it was a big shock for people around you?

Waheed: And she was like, 'You, you? You want to cover?' And I was thinking, 'Why, am I some town slapper that I can't cover', but you know it's such a shock. She was like, 'No, but I never expected it from you.'

Suterwalla: Okay so it was quite a dramatic thing for you to do in terms of your behaviour and how people knew you?

Waheed: And I was like, 'Yeah I know. I wouldn't expect you to think I would.' I'm just as wild as you get but I never... you never would have thought I would've been one person who would've covered. I took pride in my hair. My hair was my best asset, my best asset. It was me. It really was a part of me and my personality and my character. And that's what it was like.

Suterwalla: So you didn't want to just cut it off? Did you ever think about that sort of thing instead?

Waheed: There were a lot of prerequisites to wearing the hijab. At the time I knew I wasn't practising and I wasn't praying five times a day and I didn't really know my religion inside out blah blah blah. Because my understanding of hijab was that before you started covering you know it was just a part of practising your religion. The modesty aspect of me covering didn't actually kick in until about two years ago. I didn't understand the concept of covering completely.

Suterwalla: So hang on. So what year was it that you talked to your friend and said I'm thinking about putting on the hijab?

Waheed: That was when I was 21.

Suterwalla: Okay, 21 so 2005. No, yeah 2005?

Waheed: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Suterwalla: And you were...just to clarify you were not practising in any other way?

Waheed: Not then but I am more now.

Suterwalla: Sorry not back then you weren't, yeah?

Waheed: No, no, I wasn't at all practising. I didn't know how to practice I didn't know what to do.

Suterwalla: So it was around the issue of the way that you were being objectified by men?

Waheed: Yeah.

Suterwalla: And you didn't feel that...So you didn't feel like just cutting your hair off? That wouldn't have answered the problem?

Waheed: No.

Suterwalla: Because you would...why not?

Waheed: I think where I was looking for certain answers that were deeper than that, you know, that were more about my identity. You know as a whole just like, when you're reflecting upon your character, events, certain events that have occurred in your life. I haven't had the best of lives where you know I did come across a lot of tragedy and all the rest of it but the thing is it was...there was a sense of comfort when I realised that okay this is why everything happens, you know your purpose. What the end goal is, why you know why certain things happen in your life. I was really trying to figure out that stuff. So it was just one of those. I wish I'd known that sooner and I could've let go of all the resentment that I had of all, all the tragic events that had occurred.

Suterwalla: Okay so you started to cover, and when you say cover, what did you do? You put the headscarf on? How, how did you do it?

Waheed: Yes. At first when I wore it, I wore it properly as in not like a bandana or the headscarf. I completely covered my hair and my neck and everything. But I hadn't covered my bosom, I wasn't covering that. And I just put it on and I left and went to work.

Suterwalla: What was it? A plain black headscarf?

Waheed: Yes. It was like a plain black headscarf and you have beads on the edges and things like that. So it was quite a bling headscarf. For the first couple of days I was wearing it where my front wasn't completely covered, my bosom wasn't covered. And when I was leaving to go out once, my mum said to me, 'What are you doing? You know when you're wearing the hijab the whole purpose of it is that you cover your bosom as well.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay then.' But I just took her word for it. I did no reading, I did no checking, I just took her word for it and did it. And then a couple of days later I started wearing it properly, covering the bosom and going out and wearing it. At that point I still was wearing tracksuits and things like that. I was still wearing the Western attire in my tracksuits and trainers and jeans and things like that. As well as wearing the hijab. So I was a bit like a tom-boy hijab-girl. I think that it gradually started to change because then the irony of it is that as I started covering up a lot more, I started taking a lot more pride in my appearance.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Waheed: So from there I decided that I needed to change my dress sense. And then I started wearing trousers. I was still wearing my jeans but it was the summer when I chose to stop wearing it. It was boiling hot, but I was fine. I just started wearing much more high street stuff. And then I started becoming a lot more girly. I went okay, now I have to find matching shoes and a matching hijab.

Suterwalla: Did you go to any hijab shops?

Waheed: No! And I don't plan to. And then I felt that this was me, I was putting together the hijab with really nice clothes from the high street.

Suterwalla: Sorry, did you'd never go to special hijab shops and get your outfits from there?

Waheed: No, no. Not at all. I have completely my own style. Whatever is the latest trend, I will go with it. I love high-street fashion. It's something that has grown on me since I started covering. I love high street fashion. I'm a self-

proclaimed fashionista. I put everything together with great effort, you know my headscarves and my outfits. Make sure they're matching.

Suterwalla: That's so interesting isn't it. That you've become more and more fashionable. So talk to me a bit more about that. How does that play out in your mind?

Waheed: Well partly it's just about getting older and getting more bothered. Well there are certain things that I can't wear. Mini-dresses, the sixties mini-dresses. When the cowboy boots were coming out and everyone was wearing denim skirts, I wanted to do all that. Obviously you can't. So I struggled a bit but I mixed and matched to whatever was appropriate. Modest, appropriate dresses but always up-to-date. I have completely my own style. Whatever is the latest trend, I will go with it. But I make it my own. I just love my fashion. And my shoes! I'm always shopping for the trendiest shoes, they have to go- they have to match my outfit.

Suterwalla: So could you describe for me what you wore today?

Waheed: I wore jeans! Today is not a very modest day.

Suterwalla: How come?

Waheed: I wore knee high boots, but they're nearly thigh-high. And a long cardigan.

Suterwalla: And then your hijab.

Waheed: And my hijab.

Suterwalla: Right, okay, so when you say your dress today wasn't very modest, was that because of the thigh-high boots, were they quite attention-grabbing and so not modest in that way?

Waheed: Yeah, they're gorgeous, you definitely notice them! But I have worn abaya too in the past when I was working at a private Islamic school.

Suterwalla: And did you ever cover your face with niqab?

Waheed: I did actually, for a short period of time.

Suterwalla: With niqab?

Waheed: Yes. I wore the niqab about, when Jack Straw made the comments about women remove your veils or something.

Suterwalla: Okay. Was it directly a response to that then, as a protest to what he said? Is that what you mean?

Waheed: Good timing, everyone would put it. I started wearing it about a week before.

Suterwalla: Okay, so let's just go back to that period. Talk to me about that. What happened exactly? What made you put it on?

Waheed: It was during Ramadan and I went into seclusion prayer for the last ten days. There are a certain amount of days where you're in complete seclusion and your sufficient in prayer and things like that to God.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Waheed: And I chose to do that for the first time. Someone recommended it. They said, why don't you try it for about five days or something. And I thought, oh God being cut off the world for five days. Then I was like, oh go on then, I'll try it. And I did and I was in complete seclusion for five days. That is when you're completely reflecting, you're praying, you're fasting, you're at the height of complete devotion.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Waheed: To your religion and to God and things like that.

Suterwalla: Okay so that was purely religiously motivated? How did you feel putting it on?

Waheed: When I first put it on, I felt really liberated and I felt it was really empowering.

Suterwalla: In what way?

Waheed: It was quite amusing watching the reaction of everyone thinking, oh my God, she's covered her face. Because my character and my personality is quite loud and I'm bubbly, friendly and outspoken and things like that. And everyone thought, oh my God, she's gone and covered her face.

Suterwalla: So you liked that reaction?

Waheed: Work, colleagues, everyone. Everyone who knows me just knows I'm not a quiet person. It's just not me. It was quite amusing to see their reactions. You know at that time I was really thinking about female empowerment and women's rights and I'd just done a documentary with Channel 4 about women's rights in the mosques. And we had a few interviews with journalists that same day. You're promoting it before it's released. And I was wearing it and it was all around that time and I was really thinking hard about my identity and about faith and stuff and I had to go and meet a few of my colleagues who I worked with because. Because it was a Muslim, civil rights lobby group, I used to work for. I felt like I was looking forward to it because I thought, okay, these lot haven't seen me for God knows how many days. Because we spent a lot of time working with each other and all the rest of it and they haven't seen me for about a week.

Suterwalla: But they knew that normally you wear hijab, right?

Waheed: Yes. I'd already worn hijab so this was going to be a niqab.

Suterwalla: Did you wear gloves on your hands and stuff?

Waheed: No, no, no. I think I took that as too far! And the thing is, I didn't wear the black one either, where you can just about see the eyes. I used to use my pashmina so whatever headscarf I was using, I'd just keep it longer on one side and use the same headscarf as a niqab and pin it onto the other side. I was trying it out, and using my pashminas...

Suterwalla: Right, okay. So was it a kind of experiment then in terms of how far you wanted to go? And you're still using the scarves from the high street that you would have worn as hijab?

Waheed: Yeah, I mean if that meant me wearing a yellow hijab, that would mean that I was wearing a yellow niqab!

Suterwalla: And you put it on. What happened next?

Waheed: I went to go and see my colleagues and they were absolutely gobsmacked. They just couldn't believe it.

Suterwalla: And how did that make you feel?

Waheed: I started laughing. I found it quite amusing. I just found it really amusing because... I would say I have quite a strong personality, I just make spontaneous acts. I'll just do them randomly without any thought. I was quite known to do that. So if you'd go somewhere, people would think, oh it's just her. Acting about or something. Its just a phase and all the rest of it. I was expecting that and I prepared myself for it mentally as well. Because I thought, I know exactly who's going to say that to me. And yes, it'll hurt but you know what, I'm not doing it for them, I'm doing it for myself and who I am. So I'm just going to leave it at that.  
At first, we didn't discuss why I'd done it. When I left the house wearing it, I was on a high. But then I felt slight apprehension because of people's reactions. I think it was 2006 when all the Jack Straw stuff was happening and I really wanted to show my position.

Suterwalla: So I want to come to the comment that you made about Jack Straw. Because one of the things I really want to explore is; to what extent are British identity politics a part of your decision-making with the hijab?

Waheed: It's massive.

Suterwalla: Sorry. What I mean is that you've mentioned that putting on the hijab and putting on niqab, of course they are part of your act of faith, like a form of worship, but is there another dimension to it which might be about rejecting Western values, and the traditional ideals of what women should look like in Western culture?

Waheed: Oh yes. Definitely. Well the thing is, if you saw me today, you'd say I'm contradicting myself. And some people do actually say to me; Annika, you're contradicting yourself. What the hell are you wearing? My dress, whatever I've always worn has no influence whatsoever from a man. Even though it was probably a male designer that designed it. But no-one's ever influenced me to wear whatever I wanted to wear. Whether it be looking modest or not. The thing is, the Western culture for women is so harsh. Its

completely stripping them of dignity. With the women on page three and all the rest of it. They create so many insecurities in women.

Suterwalla: Right. Okay can you say more about this?

Waheed: With the size zero argument. A woman has to conform. You know, a woman has got to conform to societies so called aesthetically pleasing look. Or a woman has to wear a size ten or she has to look gorgeous. 'She's not wearing that', 'What was she wearing?' A woman can't have cellulite, she can't be fat, she has to loose weight after she's had her baby. You know, all this kind of stuff. This for me is Western ideology. This has come from the Western culture.

Suterwalla: Okay, and you don't like that? Is wearing the hijab connected with your feelings about that?

Waheed: With Islam, we have that freedom to dress modestly and dress the way we want to without anyone dictating to us as well. So for me, dressing modestly and the way that I want, covering my hair is liberating because no one's dictating to me. No one's telling me what to do or how to do it. Whereas with Western ideology and Western culture it dictates to you. Magazines tell you what to wear, magazines tell you what's hot and what's not.

Suterwalla: Do your Muslim sisterhood judge the way that you wear hijab? Do you feel there are any proscriptions around it, and the way it should be worn? Do you think Muslim men might judge you?

Waheed: Well there is that, but that's not what I'm in it for, I'm in it because it's right for me and my beliefs. I took the niqab off.

Suterwalla: Why was that?

Waheed: It wasn't me. I just couldn't do it. Because the thing is I felt like there was a certain personality that came with wearing the niqab. You had to be a bit more quiet, you had to be a bit... you couldn't stand out. I'm five foot ten, I stand out like a sore thumb. Let alone with my gob, I'm about six foot with my mouth open!

Suterwalla: (Laughter)

Waheed: Wearing the niqab. I wore it for three months. I went to the US and I wore it there. And I was really happy wearing it and all of that. And I went to DC and I had to go help my aunt give birth to her second child. So I went there to help her, and I was at the hospital speaking to all the nurses and doctors. And no one batted an eyelid. So no one thought anything of it. They were just talking to me normally and I thought, 'Wow this is really amazing.' Because I had a completely opposite reaction when I was in the UK wearing it. But that was because obviously the media had thrown it completely out of proportion with Jack Straw's comments and things like that.

Suterwalla: What did you make of all of that, that hype around the veil becoming so front of the news.

Waheed: I think it was just adding more fuel to the fire of spreading Islamophobia.

Suterwalla: Did you feel, do you feel that there was a lot of Islamophobia?

Waheed: Yes, yes. There is and it still exists and it will increase. I think there's loads, it's a massive issue for me, the way Muslims are represented and treated.

Suterwalla: And it that as a result of 9/11?

Waheed: I would say it was a hugely important contributing factor to it, yes. And after that I think Muslims get a really hard deal and I want to show that I'm Muslim and I'm proud and I'm going to stand up for my rights. I would say Islam bashing is rife within the UK. But the thing is, sooner or later it's always going to rise because there would be an uproar about foreign policy. With the invasions of so many Muslim countries, with Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine for example. There will come a day when whether 9/11 occurred or not that there would be an uproar and there would be a clash of civilisations. Where British Muslim's will begin to stand up and speak against the establishment with the foreign policy.

Suterwalla: Was your dress part of that statement?

Waheed: Look, it's faith but I am Muslim that's my identity and I show it, in the street, in Britain. I am an activist about a lot of causes. My dress is a statement about being able to dress modestly, having the right to. And my commitment and devotion to god. But it's about who I am, I'm not going to

listen to all the crap that comes out of the media about how I should look, I'm not going to let other people dictate to me how I should look.

Suterwalla: So would I be fair in saying that, it's a devotional act and also an act of your type of feminism, what I mean is that this is how you express your type of feminism in terms of girl power?

Waheed: I think that would be true. The feminism aspect probably would have initiated it, but it's about devotion to God too.

Suterwalla: Yes.

Waheed: At first I didn't understand the whole concept of dressing modestly from a religious and spiritual aspect. I started wearing it from more of a feminism one.

Suterwalla: I've just got two more things, thank you so much for taking so much time. The first thing is, physically, in terms of the touch, the feel. How did it impact your body, how did it make you feel? I'm thinking in particular here of the fact that you've got something covering your ears for example.

Waheed: Oh I love the feel of it going on. Oh, the tight pulling round, it's great. I'm transformed when I wear the hijab, because my hair has always been a big issue for me and it used to attract attention, and I look really different with it hidden and covered, I definitely look really different, it's more about who I am. The thing is I love wearing the hijab because I feel like I've found me. I've found who I am as a person. I was sick to death of being judged by the way that I looked. And the thing is someone could say, it's funny I say that because someone could have preconceived ideas about me wearing the hijab with the whole Muslim terrorism and this that and the other. And all the oppression. I love it! I love it when someone thinks I'm oppressed wearing my hijab because when they see the size of my mouth when I open it they completely change their mind.

Suterwalla: Do you feel empowered wearing it?

Waheed: Yes. Absolutely.

Suterwalla: In what way?

Waheed: Pardon?

Suterwalla: Sorry. In what way?

Waheed: In every way possible. Whether it be dressing modestly, someone judging me, who I represent, my devotion to god. Everything. In every aspect of my life, I am empowered. I'm happy wearing it.

Suterwalla: And so the only reason you took niqab off was because you felt it was...

Waheed: I couldn't conform to the typical norms of wearing the niqab. You know saying that, I have met girls who wear niqab. A very close friend of mine actually, she wears niqab and she's got a loud personality and everything like that. The thing is, it does restrict you. I felt like it restricted me. It doesn't restrict others but on a personal level I felt like it restricted me.

Suterwalla: In what way?

Waheed: Because the etiquette that comes with wearing the niqab. I want to be able to do things, like I want to go and travel and we're not allowed to go travel on our own wearing a niqab. You can't really be...

Suterwalla: So hang on a minute. I didn't realise that there was a different code of conduct through that dress.

Waheed: Well there is and there isn't. There is one that comes with it but you just don't realise it until you're in that situation yourself. The thing is I think it's quite different to hijab and I only did it for a bit and so I'm not an expert on that, but I know why I wear hijab. I think it's nonsense that people think you are different in your freedom because you wear hijab. I go and travel on my own and I do whatever I want on my own. I don't have any man assisting me in any way shape or form. My friend, as a prime example, she wears niqab she has an amazing personality and is a right laugh. Outside, me and her, it's hilarious. People stare at us when me and her are having a laugh, she's wearing niqab, I'm wearing just a hijab. They'll find it quite shocking the way we... we just have a normal laugh with each other. But when she's in an environment where there are men around, she's a lot quieter. I don't like that. I think you should be the way you are, whatever the situation.

Suterwalla: How much of your hijab or your niqab wearing was about sex separation?

Waheed: None, whatsoever.

Suterwalla: So was it just about identifying yourself as a Muslim in public space?

Waheed: Yes. Yes. I went to stay with my mum's sister. And her husband is not... you know, if my uncle divorced my aunt I could still potentially marry him. When I was in front of him, I still chose to wear it. Even though everyone was like, oh you don't have to wear it, why are you wearing it. He's your uncle, he's like your dad. Blah, blah, blah and I was like, sorry, I'm not comfortable with it. I want to wear it in front of him. And nobody stopped me, I did it. So it was again, another sign of modesty. It was just something that I wanted to do myself.

Suterwalla: What about in your everyday life in London, how do you find wearing the hijab in that context?

Waheed: It's who I am and it's how I want to dress and present myself. I'm completely normal when I have my hijab on, I mean I'm me. No one had any trouble understanding me or communicating with me. You've got a gob, use it. Just because I have a hijab it doesn't stop me expressing myself whether you're happy or sad.

Suterwalla: So, the talk about ban the burka, what do you feel about that?

Waheed: You know what, a lot of people have a lot of interpretations of what the burka is. Is the burka the one where you're completely covered, you see nothing.

Suterwalla: Yes. I'm referring to it as the kind of niqab equivalent.

Waheed: Oh that. I think it is a choice. If a woman wants to wear it, let her wear it. But I strongly object to anyone dictating to her telling her, don't wear it or to take it off. Because it's a choice.

Suterwalla: And do you think the women who wear it whose lives do become more restricted by it feel emancipated?

Waheed: You know the thing is, it comes down to each individual's interpretation of what a restriction is. So many women who wear it are happily wearing it.

And I think if it was such a restriction upon them, would they continue wearing it.

Suterwalla: Okay.

Waheed: They wouldn't. They'd take it off in a second. If I found it restrictive, I'd take it off

Suterwalla: Yes. Sure.

Waheed: You know, it was a choice. We're talking about Britain here, not Saudi Arabia, they're nutters there. Again it was my choice to put it on and it will be my choice whether I take it off. No one told me to do it, and no one tells me to take it off, it's my own choice. A lot of Western media or Western democracy like Sarkozy are coming out, Jack Straw coming out. Making these grand statements about women having to remove it or that they don't have any characters or personalities because they dress modestly. They are not individuals that don't have identity. I think it's actually... they have the audacity to say that. Because the thing is, we're living in a Western democracy. We have the right to do and say what we want. There's freedom of speech, there's freedom of dress. No one can tell you what to do. It's ironic for them so say something like that because you don't sit here and tell women to put their coats back on. You don't tell page three girls to put their bras back on or to cover up and have some self-respect. You never see that happening.

Suterwalla: And would you say that any of the stuff that has been said about repression and the arguments that have been made about social cohesion in Britain... how do you feel about those?

Waheed: No. Just because your head or face is covered doesn't mean your mouth is closed. When I started wearing the niqab, my neighbours were fully aware of who I was. When I had new neighbours maybe, I went over and I said hello, even though I had it on.

Suterwalla: So you don't think it impacts...

Waheed: It doesn't stop all my communication with them.

Suterwalla: And you don't think it has an impact on social cohesion?

- Waheed: Not at all. I think it comes down to the person who's actually wearing it themselves. They have the responsibility to ensure that they fully integrate with everybody. I don't think it has anything to do with social cohesion. I think it's a lack of education of the other person who is not aware of the reasons for why people wear the veil who are intimidated by it. Because naturally humans are not comfortable with change and if they don't understand something the instant reaction is fear. They get scared.
- Suterwalla: Annika, can I ask you one last question and then I'll let you go. This is a question around being within the Muslim sisterhood. Is it very free and emancipated within the sisterhood? Is there any sense of judgment about whether you're devotional enough, whether you're doing it right, whether you're covered modestly? There's a lot of stuff on the internet where people are chatting and saying, am I allowed to wear nail varnish, am I allowed to do this, am I allowed to do that. How much pressure comes from the inside? I mean inside your community? How free do women feel from the inside in terms of emancipation? Are they still being judged by their sisters?
- Waheed: Naturally, whether you're practising or not, women are just mental I tell you now, woman are bitches. Whether you're practising or not. If in your own eyes you're practising your religion perfectly. I would put that in inverted commas. There are elements of righteousness that occur. So people start to think that, 'Oh look she's not wearing it properly, she's not dressed properly, she's not dressed modestly, why's she wearing the hijab like that?' But on the whole, I don't think that's different from all the pressure women feel whatever they are wearing, especially from other women who are all in competition. Especially white women. So within the sisterhood aspect of it, there are people who try and put pressure by saying, 'You should wear it like this and that.' But that's everywhere.
- Suterwalla: Yes.
- Waheed: So it's not something that personally... My friends do turn round and say to me, what on earth are you wearing today. They're not being judgmental towards me but they know that everyone out there is going to have a thing or two to say about me. She's wearing the hijab, why's she wearing skinny jeans with it? We can see the shape of her legs. I know I'm not doing it justice, I know I'm not wearing something modestly to the tee. But I know my intention and I'll be held accountable for whatever on the day of

judgment between me and my God. My punishment is my punishment, it hasn't got anything to do with anyone else.

Suterwalla: Right.

Waheed: I won't judge anyone else because I'm not perfect myself. No one is perfect. No one is in a position, who practises Islam, to judge. It's an oxymoron that I would even say. You can't do that, it's not a part of religion.

Suterwalla: Well Annika, thank you so much. I've really really enjoyed speaking with you. I know we've run out of time now but we're going to meet again, do you want to schedule something now?

[Interview continues on the subject of Suterwalla and Waheed's second meeting, and is concerned with the details of a convenient time and place. This part of the interview has not been included in the transcript here].

End