

ONE YEAR ON...

what has
changed?



A YEAR AFTER THE KILLING OF GEORGE FLOYD AND THE RESURGENCE OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT, **GEMMA CALVERT** SPEAKS TO BLACK WOMEN IN BRITAIN, WHO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ABOUT WHETHER PROGRESS IS BEING MADE, OR IF THERE'S STILL A LONG WAY TO GO.



Denize, who lives in south London, believes that at long last "there is a sea of change".

“History will repeat itself unless we are all brave enough to confront it.”

they called for racial justice and the reform of white-dominated institutions.

In 260 towns across the UK, protesters chanted tributes to Grenfell Tower victims, the Windrush generation and people who lost their lives during encounters with the police.

“I was 15 when [Dorothy] Cherry Groce was shot in her house in Brixton in 1985,” recalls freelance publicist Denize, citing a woman who was injured by police. “That incident sparked the Brixton riots. I remember the last unrest we had in the UK in 2011 with the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan.

“George Floyd’s death felt like déjà vu. Yes, it was across the pond, but it struck a chord globally because it was yet another example of racial injustice — and the world saw it.”

As a teenager, Denize fought for political change. She sold *The Young Socialist* newspaper, attended Red Wedge pro-Labour events fronted by musician activists Billy Bragg and Paul Weller, and marched to oppose apartheid.

But in the summer of 2020, while shielding her

American, Eric Garner, when he was killed by police in New York City in 2014.

A video of Floyd’s killing quickly went viral and his family labelled it “a modern-day lynching”. Then a seismic Black Lives Matter movement erupted in 60 countries and across 2,000 cities, uniting 26 million people of all races and ages as

elderly mother during the coronavirus pandemic, she abstained from physical protest. After suffering years of micro-aggressions and casual racism, from being called ‘Chalky’ by her friend’s dad at the age of 17 to last summer, while applying sun lotion at a garden party, being stroked by a stranger who asked, “Well, do Black people burn?”, not partaking was, Denize says, heartbreaking.

“I could only lend my voice by literally hanging out the window waving at everyone walking past with their banners, keeping in touch with friends and having FaceTime with people who were on the ground. I’ve since helped launch a racial justice group at my church. I do think this time something is different, that there is a real sea change. Maybe it’s because of the pandemic, Brexit and coming off the back of the #MeToo movement. It’s important that people make sure the conversation keeps going.”

And there has been change. Black Lives Matter — first popularised by Black people after the shooting of American Trayvon Martin in 2012 in the US — attracted unprecedented numbers of white supporters last summer. In the UK, hundreds of businesses including Lloyds Banking Group, Boots and Microsoft UK have since committed to addressing inequality and tackling racism in the workplace.

Tesco is now selling plasters in a variety of shades — the first supermarket to do so — and statues commemorating figures involved in the transatlantic slave trade have been removed, including one in Cardiff’s City Hall dedicated to Battle of Waterloo hero Sir Thomas Picton, the governor of Trinidad who abused slaves.

There has been notable progress in the media too with giants including ITV and Facebook actively addressing inequality in the creative sector. In January, Black »



Phyllis believes we need to get to a stage where schools can teach ongoing Black history education, instead of just Black History Month.



Yetunde has launched Solaris, a leadership development programme to help Black professional and executive women.

need to be anti-racist and I think that message is getting out.”

Anti-racist thinking, believes Paula, will be established through consistent open dialogue about race and though she appreciates some may feel anxious about saying the wrong thing, which in turn may lead to accusations of racism, staying silent is more detrimental.

“Many in this country do not have to engage with people of colour on a daily basis — we make up, after all, only 3% of the population — but they need to step out of their comfort zone and not shy away from discussion,” Paula says. “History will repeat itself unless we are all brave enough to confront it.”

Phyllis Woodfire (57), a registered osteopath and NLP practitioner, was raised in Peckham, south London, by Caribbean immigrant parents. She believes the absence of visible protests and social media activism since the peak of the Black Lives Matter protests reflects dwindling progress for Black people in Britain.

“I get quite frustrated by it,” she says. “In the ’80s, when I was in my twenties, I marched for Anti-Apartheid and I feel the situation today is almost the same. I’d like to see more companies actively following a more diverse culture and recognise that they can do more. Then instead of a Black History Month, the ongoing teaching of Black history in schools.”

Detective Chief Inspector Karen Geddes, one of the UK’s senior Black police officers, shares Phyllis’ concern.



Paula Rhone-Adrien, the UK’s leading Black barrister, has experienced racism from clients and fellow barristers.

Speaking on Sky News’ Race and Revolution programme last November, she said, “The danger is when you don’t see the protests, you don’t see the statues falling, we

journalist Charlene White was announced as lead anchor on ITV’s *Loose Women*, Netflix launched a category dedicated to Black storytelling and racial injustice and for three years from April, the BBC is ploughing £100m into producing more inclusive content with new programmes required to meet a 20% diversity quota.

“You turn on the TV and it doesn’t seem such a surprise,” comments Denize. “Gone are the days in the ’70s and ’80s where Mum would pick up the phone to my auntie and say, ‘Turn on BBC2, there’s Black people on’. There is more integration and there are the voices out there.”

But what of law enforcement? In 2019, England and Wales had the highest number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) police staff ever recorded but last July, Her Majesty’s chief inspector of constabulary, Sir Thomas Windsor, said disproportionate use of stop and search on Black men was making it harder to make police forces more diverse.

Last July, the UK’s leading Black barrister Paula Rhone-Adrien went public about her own multiple experiences of racism in the workplace, not only from clients but fellow barristers who, for example, have mistaken her for either a client or social worker and asked her to leave a room.

“I do not know a Black barrister who hasn’t suffered racism at The Bar,” says Paula, who last year launched a campaign for compulsory equality and diversity training of barristers to drive out racism at the top tier of the British justice system. She believes similar programmes should be mandatory for everyone working in a position of authority, from the police to teachers.

“We all harbour prejudices and all have to confront them because if we don’t, we get lazy. And that is why George Floyd struck a chord with people, because we knew we got lazy,” she says. “It’s not enough to not be racist, people

“For every 100 men promoted into management positions, only 58 Black women are.”

lose that visible message and then we go back to that position of comfort. My fear is we go back and in 10 years' time we're discussing the same question about what concrete changes have been made.”

Disappointment aside, Phyllis insists she will continue doing her own small bit to elicit change — by delivering calm, constructive feedback every time she encounters racism.

“I will point out what's happening so people have a reality about what's going on and always talk about the elephant in the room,” she explains. “We've got to do what we can to try and make the world a better place.”

In her twenties, if someone made a racist comment, she would tell them they were “inappropriate”. Then in her first job as a local council building surveyor — at the time, the only Black woman in a technical role — she often received telephone complaints from tenants about their Black and Asian neighbours. “The caller would say something racist, not knowing I was Black and I'd have no qualms telling them they were being racist. The problem had nothing to do with their neighbour's colour.”

Since retraining in osteopathy, another profession where she says that Black people are a minority, Phyllis runs her own practice in central London and teaches at two universities where she volunteers — as a student support, mentoring emerging talent in her field. She is also working towards a professional coaching qualification.

“As a Black person and certainly as a Black woman, you've got to be above and beyond professionally to make yourself stand out,” she explains. “I'm continually knocking with a hammer through that glass ceiling!”

According to recent research, for every 100 men promoted into management positions only 58 Black women are. But why? Yetunde Hofman, who was 16 when she relocated to Britain from Nigeria and in 2011 became one of the first Black women to reach the top of a FTSE25 company, describes “the double-edged sword” of being female and Black.

“They face every single challenge that a woman would, including micro-aggression on the basis of her gender, then on top of that, she's Black. This applies right across geography — the darker your skin, the bigger the challenge.”

In April, inspired by Black Lives Matter, Yetunde — now in her mid-fifties and living in Hampshire — launched Solaris, a leadership development programme to help Black professional women rise above “misogynoir” (a blend of racism and sexism specific to Black women) to become future leaders.

Every year, 30 women will join the course to build skills in strategy, leadership, communication, personal-branding, negotiation and the power of networking.

Like 50% of Black Britons, former HR director Yetunde has experienced racism in the workplace. But rather than dwelling on negatives from her past, she believes in forgiveness and keenly highlights how her biggest career “wins” were facilitated by “the white middle-aged male”. It's why one of her top tips for Black women in business is to strengthen their power by diversifying their network.

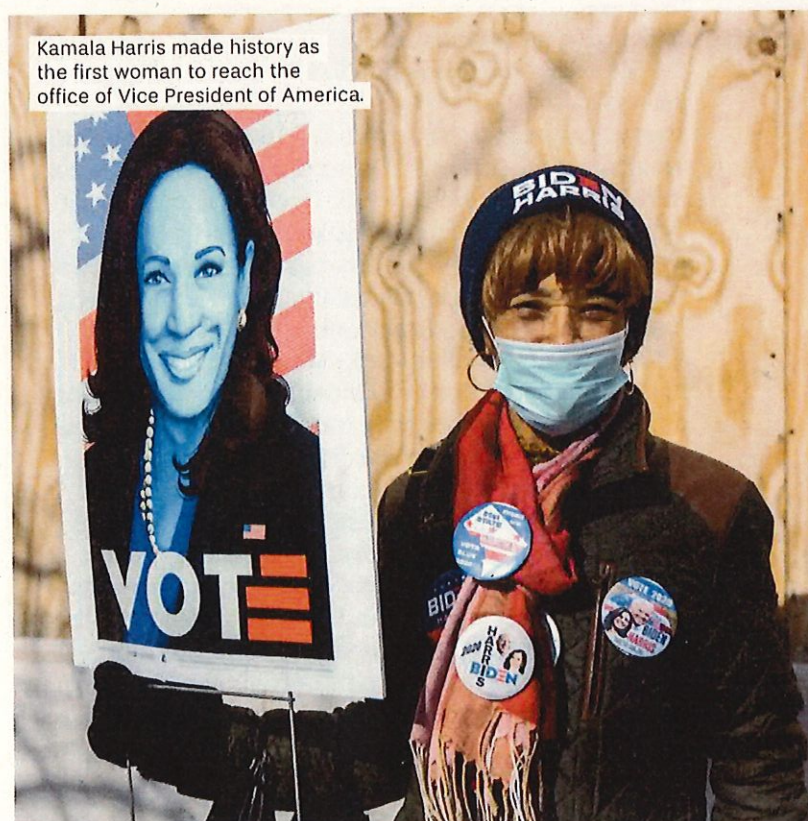
“Give people an opportunity to support you, and enrol allies,” she advises. “That person will be your advocate in the talent review room after you've had 100 interviews and failed each one because of your race or your gender. That person will say, ‘She's got something, let's give her a chance’.”

One woman with a new seat at the top table is Kamala Harris, America's new vice president — the first woman and also the first person of Black and Asian heritage in the role — and the most powerful woman in US history.

Carole Boyce Davies, a professor of English and African Studies at New York's Cornell University, believes Kamala is timely proof to Black women everywhere that anything is possible.

“We are still the most underpaid, the most super-exploited, the ones that society still thinks has to clean up after them. Kamala [is] saying we deserve to be wherever others think we should not be in terms of leadership in any institution — from entertainment to government,” she says.

“Kamala is a front runner in the United States which makes her a frontrunner in the world. We learn from her mistakes and her advances.” »



“Why education will challenge racism and discrimination.”



DR SIMON PELOW, SENIOR TEACHING FELLOW IN 20TH CENTURY BRITISH HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK, OFFERS HISTORICAL CONTEXT.

“Britain has long perpetuated a self-perception of itself as a being a ‘welcoming and tolerant nation’ — with ideas that, to explore issues of racism, you need to look to places like the US because racism is ‘not a problem in Britain’.

“This has led to the downplaying or ignoring of key and important aspects of the Civil Rights Movement in Britain, such as tireless campaigner and activist Olive Morris, founding member of groups like the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent, as well as the Brixton Black Women’s Group; the 1963 Bristol Bus Boycott, a successful campaign to overturn racial discrimination in a local bus company; or the Mangrove Nine, a group of Black British activists who exposed police racism in the early 1970s that led to the first judicial acknowledgment of racial hatred in the Metropolitan police.

“For instance, we are often reminded about Britain’s ‘heroic’ abolition of the slave trade, but not about how Britain built its wealth from its role in perpetuating slavery — or how the resistance of enslaved people motivated abolitionist movements, and groups like the Sons of Africa.

“The events and names of US civil rights’ activists, such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or Rosa Parks are immediately recognisable to most — but how many in Britain know about the Bristol Bus Boycott or the 1958 racist riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill? Or of the importance of figures like Claudia Jones or the Mangrove Nine? Would remembering Britain’s own civil rights pioneers also mean having to acknowledge, on a national level, Britain’s long history of racism that such figures were protesting?

“While the Black Lives Matter Movement is most well-known for its attention on deaths of Black people related to police action and brutality, it has also highlighted areas of discrimination and inequality in all aspects of life in Britain — not least its education and schooling system. And addressing this needs to be sustained through long-term changes, rather than simply platitudes or being ‘seen to be doing something’ in the current climate. Acknowledging that Black history is British history, to allow Black children in particular to identify with and feel part of the history of Britain — but also to address the ongoing and contemporary issues and inequalities.”



“We want an equitable world... but there’s a long way to go.”

CAROLE BOYCE DAVIES IS PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND AFRICANA STUDIES AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK. SHE SAYS THERE’S A DISPARITY IN REACTIONS TO CRIMES COMMITTED BY DIFFERENT RACES.

“There is a continuous movement, which moves sometimes slowly but sometimes rapidly. When certain events and historical situations happen within a similar time frame we can compare how they are dealt with.

“So we were in the middle of a pandemic in May last year that shut down institutions and had most people at home.

“Then the death of George Floyd and the differences in the treatment of Black subjects was a focus. So that when white supremacists took over the US Capitol this year on January 6 we could see visually the difference in how they were treated — allowed to leave, not beaten or teargassed or shot, but casually able to go home.

“This same model works as well when white youths shoot in a school or church and then are arrested with care and sympathy, while Black people are shot down if they do anything similar. The evidence is glaring.” ■