Black Everyday Lives, Material Culture and Narrative: Tings in de House

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Directions in Cultural History

Series Editors Ben Highmore and Gillian Swanson

In dedication to…

JAH Rastafari

BEMSCA Elders

Mahalia, Aisha, Jacob,
and the next generation…

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Chapter 1 - Front Door / Hallway sign

On entering my own parents house, you are immediately greeted with two signs which contain three overlapping elements – a universal welcome, a witty poem, and a statement of national representation. (See Figure 1)

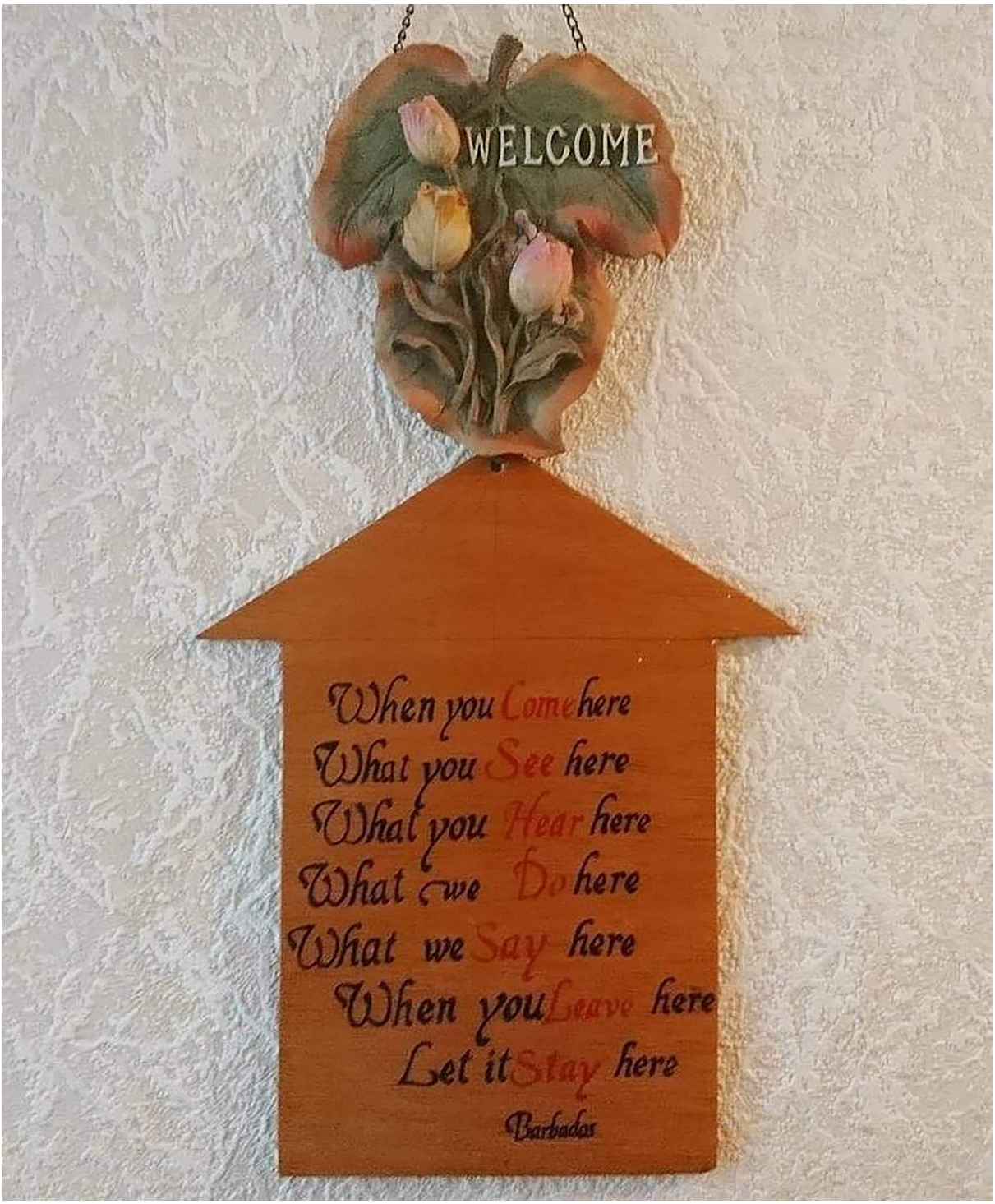

Figure 1 - Welcome signs. 2020. (Author copyright)

When you come here
What you see here
What you hear here
What we do here
What we say here
When you leave here
Let it stay here.

Barbados

The enthusiastic singular message of the “Welcome” sign, is immediately cautioned with the more reluctant sentiments contained in the poem, which is hung directly beneath, tied with the same string. In smaller letters the name ‘Barbados’ lies underneath the poem, yet we know that the repeated ‘here’ of the poem is not speaking about Barbados. We understand the country name speaks the accepted language of a souvenir, communicating the place of purchase (Lasusa, 2007: 274). The repeated ‘here’ of the poem is (of course) referring to the place where your feet are planted when you are standing there reading the sign in real life – this house. If we are still under any illusion where the ‘here’ is referring to, the wooden plaque that the poem is printed onto is in the shape of a house. The collective messaging of these signs is;

“You are welcome here....but....”

Houses, and the stories they tell, are full of contradictions. When we see such signs in any place we visit, we do not usually stand and analyse them line for line looking for the hidden meaning, especially when they are hung in a hallway, where the physical movement is usually a fluid in or out, (rather than when you’re invited in to sit on the sofa, where your eyes have more time to linger).

This chapter will examine the idea of cautionary messaging when thinking about the history of Black households in the UK, and some cautionary tales from history about the entertaining of strangers.

Both dad and mum were from lower-working class families in Barbados and arrived in England in 1960 and 1962 respectively, both aged 21 in those years. Dad settled in the city of Bath, and when Mum arrived two years later, she went to Leicester to stay with her elder sister who had arrived a few years before, who herself was staying in a house with two other families. The three-bedroom house was owned by one of the families, and they had one bedroom, the other family in the second bedroom, my mum and her sister lived in the third room, and all the older children slept in a converted room downstairs. All the occupants ate together and shared the communal spaces. Moving to Bath to be closer to her future husband, she took work at the hospital, and found a room in the same shared house as him, owned by an Italian landlady. After they were married in 1964 my parents continued to live there, moved into a single room and saved for their own house.

"We were lucky with our landlady, but we were aware some of our friends had a more difficult time. Landlords would exploit them, for example taking money to put in the electric metre, but never actually putting it in the machine, they were left in the dark and without hot water. We decided to save for our own place. We knew about saving because of our families back in Barbados, they always say, if you got 10 cents then save one. We put it in the Post Office, because if you left it in your purse of course you would spend it. We would also save money and send back home."

One of my first lessons in life, handed down to me by my parents, involved the idea of the front door as a border, and testing my self-awareness of individual responsibility and my potential impact on the family. When I was old enough to go out by myself and with friends, my mum told me sternly, waving her finger in my face.

"Do not bring the police to my front door. You hear me? Do. Not. Bring. The. Police. To. My. Front. Door!"

That was all she said, and all she had to say. Her instructions were clear, and a pre-emptive strike at whatever behaviour she imagined I could get up to. The demand is clear, and on the surface it is not culturally specific, (though what this book attempts to show is the specific cultural positioning beneath first appearance). For a mother to warn her son to not get in trouble with the police is easily understood, and is not the basis of this further analysis. What I am more interested in is the phrasing of '... *to my front door.*" That is the part that rang in my ears. It is in fact a two-part instruction, 1) do not get in trouble, and 2) do not bring the trouble back here.

At a holistic level, my mother's instruction dug deep into a historical collective consciousness and reached back to the time when Ghana's Elmina's Castle slaving port was in operation in the 1400s, the message was carried across the Atlantic and taken to the Caribbean, remembered in the plantation fields, and carried back across the Atlantic from Barbados with my parents in the early 1960s, and delivered to me circa 1982 aged 10 as I was heading out the front door, unaware of the antecedents of the instruction. The subtext of my mother's message is, '*After all what our people went through, do not bring shame on them and me by bringing police and trouble to our door'*. The use of the front door specifically in this instruction, speaks to a Du Boisian Double Consciousness awareness (Du Bois, 1903: 168), of the judgement of the external others, and is not neutral simile to simply mean 'this house'. The gaze of the ancestors and family upon me would be internal, though the gaze upon the front door would be an external gaze from a hostile external world.

It was this awareness of the external observation and judgement of others that in part motivated my mother's stern lesson, which she embodied and translated as her own first-strike as parental advice. Her instruction was to not direct the attention of the hostile world towards our own house, by invitation of my own (possible) foolish acts. These overt and covert messages were absorbed into my ten-year-old body and have been honoured to this day, though, the pressure of the pre-emptive inhouse warnings and external judgements has not evaporated, and works to make Du Bois' Double Consciousness more pronounced and visceral. Her words betrayed a fear communicated as worried anger. For many of the Caribbean settlers who arrived in the UK between the 1940s – 1970s, everyday living was to find oneself in a state of perpetual protest. Rather than placards and marches, negotiating daily

domestic tasks, negotiating employment and visiting consumer spaces became moments of heightened awareness and tension as everyday forms of activism of survival (James, 1993: 245). The essence at the root of these tensions was the exhaustiveness of attempting to decipher the hostile gazes from the friendly ones, evaluating the strangers from the friends (BEMSCA, 2022).

My sister has a memory of me as a child in the 1970s Bath, whenever the doorbell rang, I would run to the window to see who it was. If it was an unfamiliar white person, I would mock look scared and whisper to my sister with exaggerated tones, "*There's a white person at the door!*", and leave my mouth hanging open wide in comedy dramatics. I might have only been around seven years old, but in my own cheeky, irreverent and playful way, I was enacting the echoes from my West African ancestors (DeGruy, 2005: 117), and in my childlike mind positioned our own family home as our safe castle, with any notional enemies blocked at the front door. Of course, the notion of a family house as a safe space is not unique to African heritage people, though this book takes into account the argument advocated by Windrush Foundation co-founder Arthur Torrington, that in the British Empire, the existence of a stable African diaspora family unit is a phenomenon less than 200 years old (Torrington, 2014), arguing that before slavery was finally abolished on 1st August 1834, the idea of an African family on a plantation was a challenged existence, with the 'overseers' systematically fragmenting any meaningful loyalties and bonds amongst the enslaved population. Considering the precarity of the existence of the African body throughout modernity - from the capture on African soil, transport across the ocean, surviving the plantations, descendants relocating to live in the land that enforced the initial enslavement - the existence of a Black child in an English city, playing mock-scared of the English themselves, cannot be taken for granted. Rather than a mere piece of wood or metal, the front door itself becomes both a symbol of survival and a re-enactment device as the first line of defence.

For the first post-war settlers from the Caribbean, the experiences of living in a modest Victorian terrace versus a high-rise block of flats were very different, though on first arrival any sense of class difference was often neutralised, and middleclass professionals were forced to sleep on floors squashed with a whole room of others, as they worked to try and get their own shelter and stability (BEMSCA, 2022).

Whether looking to rent or buy, the experience of the arrivals to actually get through a front door was not easy. According to a study on 1950s Caribbean migration and housing by Carter, Harris and Joshi;

"Many local authorities, on a variety of pretexts...refused to house black people yet were not penalised by the minister of housing. Rather [Harold] Macmillan, as housing minister in 1954, announced a reduction in council-house building for the following year from 250,000 to 160,000. For black people the alternative to council housing was the private sector, and here discrimination, made easier by the relaxation of controls in 1954, ensured that only areas designated for slum clearance and/or areas with short-lease properties were generally available. The difficulties of finding accommodation were underscored by the reluctance of local authorities to implement redevelopment programmes which might rehousing black tenants for fear of antagonising white tenants on long waiting lists." (Carter, Harris, and Joshi, 1993: 63).

The experiences of achieving house ownership by the Caribbean newcomers are less documented in previous research, concentrating instead on the challenges of renting and social housing, but according to Wendy Webster in a study on gender and race from 1945 - 1964;

"Getting a house - especially a new house - was seen as miraculous, and the house itself often named a 'palace' in comparison with what had gone before." (Webster, 1998: 165)

It was common to have two or three jobs in the effort to save, working night shifts and overtime, and making small amounts of money stretch a long way (BEMSCA, 2022). As my mum said, *"We knew we didn't come here to just sit about. It's just what we had to do."* The employment landscape was fierce, with employment exchange offices under pressure from trade unions and employers to not place Black workers in jobs where they would be superior to their white workers, and to limit the rates of pay. According to Harris (1993, 29);

"As more and more black workers became trapped in labouring jobs so too did these jobs become identified as 'black jobs'. In a brief prepared by Ministry of Labour for a 1958 House of Commons debate, the MP Miss Hornsby-Smith was informed that white unemployed people are 'not suitable for the kind of jobs held by the coloured people'." (Ibid)

Harris goes on to say that if the argument that post-war labour shortage was valid for recruiting Black workers, then why was there an emphasis on only filling 'unskilled' jobs from the bottom up, rather than also focussing on the Black professional workers who had gained their education and training in their homelands, as the higher paid jobs would also have had a labour shortage. Harris concludes, "*extensive evidence on the downgrading experienced by black workers casts serious doubt*" (Ibid: 30) on the argument that the Black workers were predominantly unskilled and not capable of the higher paid positions.

"Discrimination in white-collar work was underlined when Prime Minister Winston Churchill, at a cabinet meeting in December 1952, instructed the Chancellor of the Exchequer to 'arrange for the examination of the possibility of restricting the number of coloured people obtaining admission to the Civil Service." (Ibid: 31)

Such was the welcome of the new arrivals, in their Caribbean homelands being enticed and seduced to board the boats and planes by the colonial recruiters, selling narratives of streets paved with gold, while upon arrival the story was rather different opposite. In her study of the London borough of Newham's housing and planning decisions and the effect they have on young people, Joy White describes the council's 1967 housing policy of imposing a five-year clause of residency in Greater London and a 1-year residency requirement in the Newham area, before a person was even eligible for a council house, meaning that Black and Asian people had little access to social housing (White, 2020: 15). White quotes the councillor at the time justifying the policy, he casually states it was put into forces to make it as difficult as possible for the new arrivals to access council housing. Such policies were similarly enacted in different areas of the country, meaning many had no choice but to turn to private accommodation (ibid).

Those Everyday Signs

The '*No Blacks, No Irish, No dogs*' signs placed in property windows in the 1950s and 60s have been well-documented across a wide range of sources, from academic research (Parker, 2019), media interviews (Harris, 2016), song titles and lyrics (Pelembe, 2019), in poetry (Chambers, 2007), and even designs on clothing merchandise, (O'Reilly, 2016). In a letter to the Guardian on 21st October 2015, reader John Draper tried to cast doubt on the veracity of the signs, arguing;

"A much-reproduced photograph is held by the Irish Studies Centre of London Metropolitan University. It depicts a front window with handwritten signs saying "Bed & breakfast" and "No Irish, no blacks, no dogs". The photograph emerged only in the late 1980s, and the university has conceded to me that it is of "somewhat uncertain" provenance. They have been unable to discover who took the picture, where or when." (Guardian - a, 2015)

A week later, on 28th October, Dr Tony Murray from London Metropolitan University responded;

"When Mr Draper contacted me about it two years ago, I explained that its provenance was, as he quotes, "somewhat uncertain" because there was no acquisition record in our files. However, I also explained that we had no reason to doubt the authenticity of the image and that the archive had received it in good faith. Mr Draper appears to be confusing authenticity with provenance. Numerous artefacts with minimal provenance are held in archives but this does not necessarily mean they are not genuine. Like most of your readers, I'm puzzled by what exactly Mr Draper is trying to prove. Ample evidence exists in numerous oral history interviews with both Caribbean and Irish migrants that such signs existed well into the 60s."
(Guardian - b, 2015)

In his original published letter John Draper does concede that, "*Notices aimed at Commonwealth immigrants ("no coloureds", "no West Indians") certainly did exist, evidence for which exists in the BBC film archive.*"

Draper is confident himself of the existence of the other signs, so quibbling over the wording seems like a moot point, and evading the bigger issue at hand, which is how actual people were treated upon their arrival and the desire to secure accommodation, rather than the semantics of how the hostility was worded. Engaging in a piece of close-to-home primary research, I ask my mother about the signs. She said although she did not see them personally, she did hear about the signs, "*especially in London*", but by her own admission she says she did not experience much racism that she noticed. Of course, everyone has different experiences, and many white British people did welcome the newcomers with open arms.

Johannesburg born musician Skinny Pelembe, who moved to Britain with his parents aged three, released a song titled '*No Blacks, No dogs, No Irish'* in 2019, a cultural mixture of UK drum & bass, funk rock, trip hop, with South African style melodies in the opening bars leading up to the lyrics.

- MUSIC SEARCH - *No Blacks, No dogs, No Irish* Skinny Pelembe – *PRESS PLAY*

Pelembe repeats the words of the title, from the infamous signs, continually in the song outro like a mantra chant. To evoke these words in such a sustained way, Pelembe acknowledges both the visibility and invisibility that Black people can feel in space where you are still viewed as 'other' and alien even when you are home, (as Ralph Ellison explored in his 1952 novel 'Invisible Man'). The ability however to not allow such sentiments to crush you, is, I believe, reflected in the composition of Pelembe's song – the harsh lyrical content balanced with a dreamlike soundtrack - heavy drums holding up a somewhat ethereal musical arrangement. Somehow the listener is reminded of some of the harsh realities of life and the impacts of racism, while at the same time managing to find peace in the moment, taken to another place in the long instrumental parts of the music – from violent visibility to the safeness of internal invisibility. However, the words on the window signs, whether there was only one, or one hundred thousand, is something that once seen, cannot be unseen, cannot be unheard. The sentiments pierce your understanding of the

very meaning of a civil society, and repeats in the consciousness like Pelembe's mantra. According to Kinouani (2021: 62)

"How can your home be truly your home if entry into it and your right of abode is conditional? When this right can so easily be denied under the racist fantasy that some other home will always be yours for you to claim and return to. Even when that connection barely exists. Even if that presumed home is in fact much more unfamiliar than your usual place of dwelling."

Even when having secured a property, the front door continued to be the battleground for resident tensions, with one side facing outwards the front door is the vulnerable skin of the house, and on occasion racist graffiti, faeces and other obscenities were daubed onto front doors by hostile locals, which became particularly prevalent in the 1970s with the increase of the racist factions of the skinhead movement and the National Front targeting Black and Asian homes and businesses (Sinclair, 2018, Gray, 2018, and Mir, 2020). Throughout 2019 and up to early 2020, reports of front doors being targeted with racist graffiti and posters telling the residents to leave the country were reported, with the UK's decision to leave the European Union being cited as the reason for these outpouring of racist attacks, sometimes admitted by the perpetrators themselves (Sharman, 2019, and Weaver, 2022). In this context, the front door represents the symbolic battleground of nationhood. Contemporary discourses relating to immigration are dominated by media stories of brown skin people trying to enter westernised national spaces, such as Europe, the United States, and Australia, with the front and back door being used as metaphors for legal and illegal entry respectively (Wright, 2018).

Entertaining Strangers

The use of the metaphor of a house as a site of battle with invading forces was the focus for British reggae artist Macka B in 1986, with his song *Invasion.* He evokes the idea of the house as a site of tension when meeting colonial visitors, being made an illegal presence in your own home, and forced to live in the back garden. He sings, *''If a man in your house, told you to come out, and told you to live in the*

garden, if it happened to you tell me what would you do, wouldn't you fight and fight and fight them?"

- MUSIC SEARCH – *Invasion Macka B – PRESS PLAY*

Macka B performed this song on BBC 2's Black-themed comedy series, The Real McCoy in 1993. At 6 minutes 40 seconds, it is a whole history lesson describing the behaviours of the colonialists as they invaded different terrains, telling the story of the marginalisation of Native Americans and Black South Africans in their own lands. Macka B directly asks the question of the audience to contemplate their response, of whether they would be prepared to defend their land and fight for their autonomy. The use of the house as a metaphor for these colonial conquests is significant, as the European forces were largely initially invited in as guests and did not need to enter by force. Asking the audience to contemplate the same happening to them in their own homes is a potent creative device.

The narrative of the colonial visitor entering a domestic space and turning hostile against the rightful owners of the land, was explored in detail in the acclaimed 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Set in a pre-colonial 19th century Nigeria, Chapter 17 deals with the arrival of European missionaries to the village of Mbanta. The missionaries ask for permission to settle in the village and for a place to build their church, and are invited in, rather than arriving using physical force. The elders of Mbanta conspire to give the missionaries part of the evil forest to build their church, in the hope that harm will come to the visitors, and they would abandon their plans and leave. Weeks pass and no harm befalls the missionaries, and subsequently their influence and presence spread among the village and the surrounding areas.

"[S]tories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion." (Achebe, 1971: 136)

The missionary's initial toehold presence is leveraged for the eventual takeover of the whole region, with the installation of new laws which the native villagers were

now subjected to. As readers we can only passively witness the village and the region being taken away from indigenous inhibiters by the missionaries and colonial representatives in plain sight, and it happens so smoothly, you can imagine as one of the African villagers, by the time you realise what has happened it is too late. The front door cannot be closed.

What the Macka B and Achebe examples have in common, is showing the precarity of comfort, and how ownership is relative to the power and danger which exudes from entitlement. All anyone wants is to feel safe at home, and when your existence is threatened from those outside, the house becomes your fortress. In Macka B's use of the house as the very site of the conflict, there is nowhere left to run but their own backyard. In Achebe's example, although the village creates more space than the confines of the house, the highly communal way the people lived in Mbanta village meant the presence of the missionaries in the nearby evil forest consumed their every waking hour with concern. Both scenarios ask, *what did pre-colonial African safe spaces feel like, and how were they lost so easily?* As succinctly stated by anthropologist and Kenya's first independence president Jomo Kenyatta (Ombati-Simon, 2012: 31).

"When the Missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the Missionaries had the Bible. They taught how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible."

I think back to my mum's warning about not bringing police (aka trouble) to the front door. I wonder if the mothers in West Africa before colonialism told that to their children when they went out to play. Strangers came to the village doors bearing gifts, and as hospitable African people were, they were invited in. In the modern world, with scammers looking for any opportunity to gain access to your home, bank account, email account, social media passwords...the list is endless. There are lessons to be learned about who to let in the front door, (and in 2020, in the era of Covid19 pandemic when many were confined to their homes, that worry took on an added meaning). Maybe more cautionary lines need to be added to the witty poem in our hallway.

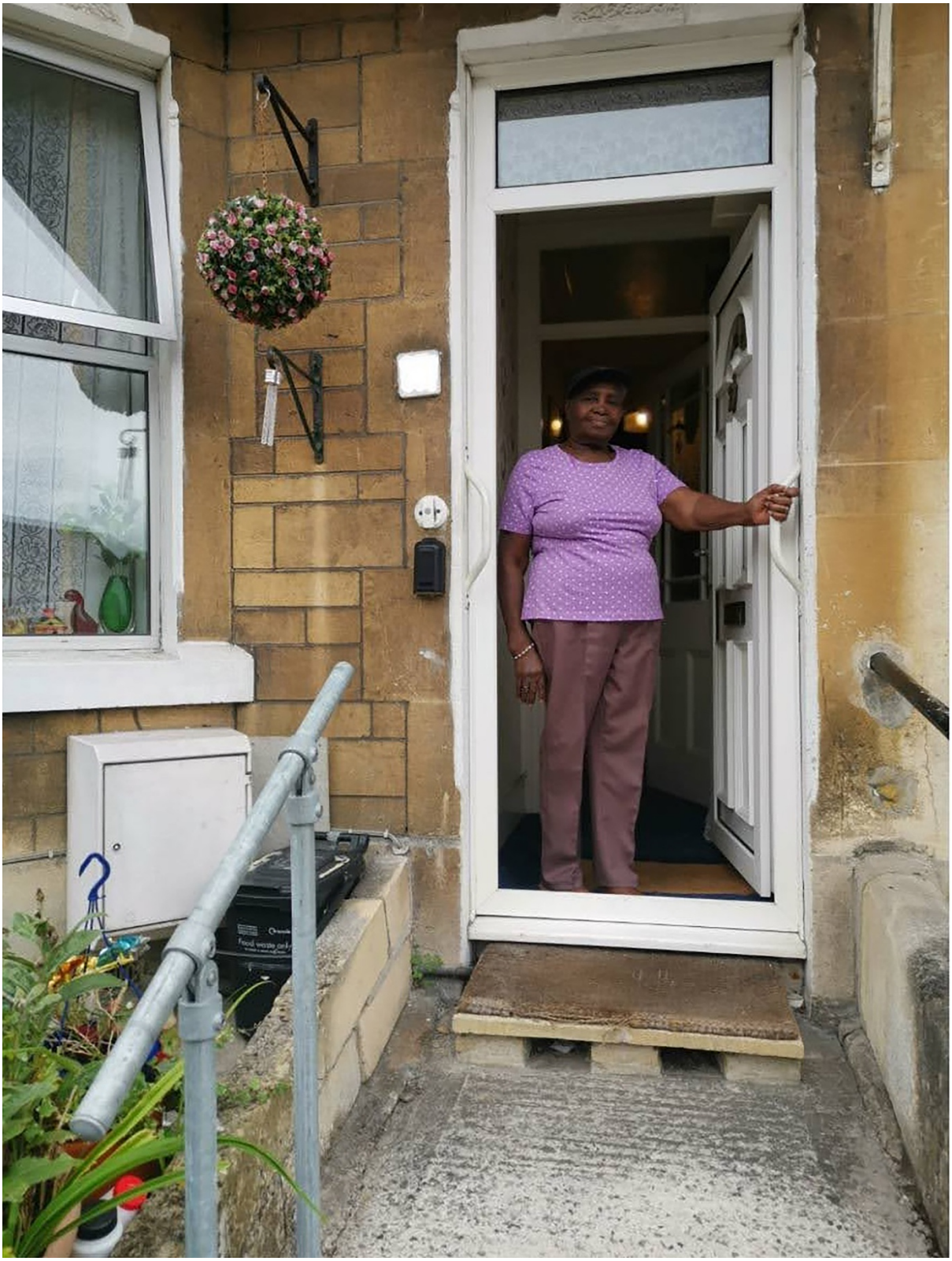

Figure 2 - Mrs Sobers. Lockdown Portrait, 2020 (Author copyright)

[END OF CHAPTER 1]