

The Young Gifted and Black

This story is told by Camille Oneida
Wendy Charles Jones.

Camille's Story

AGE WHEN INTERVIEWED: 30

BORN: Toronto, Canada

INTERVIEWED IN: Digitally

Camille Oneida Wendy Charles Jones is a qualified educator, with a bachelors degree in education. She has worked for many years as a teacher. She is a social debater, writer, a former member of the group Tabanka, and knows most of what there is to know about Black music or hip-hop, rnb and soul. She currently works as a project manager and advisor for a national NGO in Norway.

The interview was conducted before she was married, thus her last name will not reflect as Jones in the story.

1.

That audition was a very big moment in my life, and it set the tone for the rest of my life. Like, if I hadn't been there and gotten into the group, I don't know what type of person I would be. I have no idea. I don't know.

I've never really thought about it like that before.

2.

My name is, my full name is Oneida Wendy Charles. I was born in Toronto, Canada, to Caribbean parents. My mum is Jamaican, and my dad is Trinidadian. My dad, who is kind of weird, had this ad in the paper. He was looking for, you know, a little friend or something. My mum answered and then I was born. My parents divorced when I was very, very young. And when I was 8 years old, my mum met a Norwegian guy, my former stepdad. Fun fact: they met on the internet in the 90s. It was actually in those IRC chats. She was here for about six months and I lived with my dad for those six months. And then she decided that she liked the chances and that she wanted to take me here. They were married for about twelve years and then divorced. So, basically, the only blood family I have here is my mum.

I didn't grow up in Oslo. I grew up in a town a little outside of Oslo called Nittedal. And I grew up being the only black kid in school. I had one other kid, but he was mixed. He was slightly confused, I realised. But I was pretty much the only black one. I had a very

good upbringing, though. I had a very nice childhood. I didn't experience much discrimination, but when I was maybe 11 or something, I remember the first time somebody called me the N-word at school. I cried.

I moved to Oslo, and I've been here for 10 years now. I studied education at the University of Oslo. I have worked as a teacher at a primary school for four years. Actually, I quit now, and I'll be working as a consultant at the library.

I will be working with them on their program for youth.

3.

I have been a pretty strong voice for black people here, like young black people, especially women. I consider myself a feminist or a womanist. I speak about the black experience. That is a very big part of me. It hasn't always been like that, it has been a process which I'll probably tell you about later. I'm all about black empowerment, women empowerment, especially intersectionality. Everybody has their story. We are all individuals and not all black women are the same. But we do have our similarities. And I feel like I come off as a relatable person to a lot of black young women and also older women. That is basically me in a nutshell. And I feel like if you ask people about me, they will tell you what I just said. That's my, I don't want to say brand, but that's what I do.

I like to write. I used to have a blog where I wrote about things like that a lot. I have a presence on social media, Instagram and

Snapchat. I am a part of a group, a Snapchat account called SNAP Collective, which is me and nine other women. I am, of course, the only black woman there, and we have different themes that we talk about. And we have had Black History Month. We talk about feminism and all of that stuff.

Whenever I talk about stuff, I take an intersectional viewpoint or perspective. And I do that on purpose because, one, is a part of me, and two, I feel like people need to know. I mean, this is a white country. So, the people watching are mostly white women. I had a story on Snapchat about white fragility, which was very fun for me because I'm a very unapologetic person, and a lot of times when you speak on race or racism, especially to white people, you get that whole, "Oh no, I feel so sorry for you" and yadda yadda yadda. Yeah, I'm not trying to hear that. I was like, "Yoh, I do not want any DM's of you feeling sorry. I don't want anybody to respond. I just want to speak my peace." And they respected it, actually. And it went really well. I got a lot of good feedback. You'll still have some people who are touchy, who are fragile, and they showed me exactly what I was talking about.

I've written articles for different magazines and different publications. The last thing I did was about Kendrick Lamar. An awesome person and journalist who is half Gambian and half Norwegian and used to write for Dagbladet, which is one of the biggest newspapers, was supposed to write a piece on Kendrick Lamar winning the Pulitzer Prize, the first rapper to ever win a Pulitzer Prize in writing. She couldn't do it. She asked me to do it and I was very honoured. I love Kendrick Lamar. I love him. I like Hip Hop a lot. I geek on music all day. I wrote about the history

of hip-hop and how he is like our modern voice for the black experience. He is our modern-day Griot from West Africa. He is that. He is that person who touches on, especially the African American experience. A lot of people also think that hip-hop started in the 80s and that's a lie. It started way before that. That narrative bothers me. It really, really bothers me. So I kind of took it back.

I have a lot of opinions about race, racism, discrimination, politics, and anything that pertains to black people. I am very involved because I feel like that is my duty as a black person to be conscious. I think James Baldwin has that quote like, being conscious in America is being angry all the time. I'll be mad. I am mad. And I used to have a huge problem with that before. I would just be so angry and I would take it out on people. And I didn't know how to channel that anger into something positive. I would just go, go, go. And people were like, "Why are you so aggressive?" Of course, I'm going to fall into that trope, right? But whatever. I don't know if you know Amanda Seales? There is a character on the TV series, Insecure, called Issa Rae and she's played by Amanda Seales. She also comes off as aggressive to a lot of people, but as she always says, "I'm not hostile. I'm passionate." And that is like me, because when I speak people listen. So I feel like that is one of my strengths. But some fragile people will be like, "Oh, you're too aggressive". And, you know what? That's how you feel. I can't help you with that. All these white women's tears. I can't, I just can't.

I watch a lot of TV. I watch a lot of documentaries. I love true crime. Paris is Burning. Who killed Malcolm X. And Malcolm X! I

swear, he is my hero. I love Malcolm so much. Listen, this man changed my life. He changed my perspective about the black experience. I'm a diasporan because I am a Caribbean. So, I remember this speech, I remember it so well, it's titled What is Your Name? He talks about how when you came from Africa over the Atlantic and to the American Caribbean, they changed your name according to who owns you. So, you are not really a Smith, you are not a Johnson, you are not a Charles. That's not really your name. My last name is Charles, meaning the last slave owner who owned my family was Charles. That was their family name. And is that a name I am proud of? But there's so much pain in it. It's something I carry every day; I will sign my name every day and it's there all the time. I don't know what I feel.

The diasporan experience is very important to me. I feel like, at least, here it's often forgotten.

4.

I took a DNA test to find out where my ancestors were from. I saw on Okayplayer, which is like a music blog, that Eryka Badu, who is one of my favourite artists of all time, did it. I also saw that black guy from The Roots did it. I saw that Michael K Williams did it. And I remember when Michael K. Williams did it because I think he found out he was from Cameroon and then one of his best friends was also from the same tribe and everything. He literally cried because it was so emotional. And I wanted to do it, too. I really wanted to be Nigerian. I wanted to be Nigerian so bad. And since I have not set foot on the continent before, I was

like the place where I'm originally, originally from, that's where I want to go.

I used African ancestry dotcom, and then I got this whole diploma and everything. It was nice. But it said that I was from Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. And I knew absolutely nothing about these countries whatsoever. But I googled Guinea Bissau and it was like super poor, with no infrastructure and I was like why would I go there? And then Sierra Leone was war-torn and that's all I know. Liberia I know because the Freemans went over there. But I read up on Liberia because I was like why Liberia? I felt like it was only African American and I am Afro-Caribbean. But, obviously, duh! Like, everybody went over there. They shipped Caribbeans and African Americans. It made sense now, so I was like maybe I will go to Liberia.

I don't know.

5.

Growing up in such a white space, especially when I came here, there wasn't the same diversity as it is now. You get very confused, especially when you come from a place that is extremely diverse like Toronto. And people are not segregated there either. Everybody's very intertwined and it's pretty peaceful between people. So coming from that to here, the experience that triggered me was when people started questioning my identity. If people ask me where I'm from, I would always say I'm Canadian, and they're like, "Yeah, but no, you're not. Where are you really from? And that's why I was very

confused. Why don't you accept what I just told you? I just told you I'm from Canada. Why do you not view me as that? Like, what do you see me as? What do I see myself as? Am I wrong here? Like, what happened?

Of course, I have Caribbean parents, but I will always say Canadian. And when people started questioning that all the time, it's almost like you're forced to, not forced to, but I mean, you are kind of forced to actually think about it. If you do or not, that's up to you. How conscious you want to be or whatever. But it does feel weird to be othered when you have never been othered before in your life. When I'm in Canada, I'm Canadian. I'm not different there because there are people like me all over the place.

So, I started thinking about that a lot. My mum is Jamaican and I have good ties to Jamaica. I was always there when I was a kid. My mom's family is still there. When it comes to Trinidad, my dad himself hasn't been back since he moved, and he moved from Trinidad when he was five. He lived in England for 10 years and then they moved to Toronto. I've never been to Trinidad and I don't have any family in Trinidad either. So, I didn't identify as a Trinidadian. I only have family in Jamaica. So, when I started to talk about my roots, I would say Jamaican, but I wouldn't say Trinidadian. Now I say both because I identify with both, but I didn't before. So I feel like the experience of people constantly asking me, where are you from? I feel like that experience has really, and it's not like a specific event, it's a series of the same event happening over and over and over again, it really triggered me. Cause my whole thing is I need to be allowed to identify how

I want to be identified and that I need the language to do so. I feel like self-definition is very important.

Now I'm like, you're going to accept whatever I say to you. That's it.

6.

If I would point to something specific, it would be when I joined Tabanka. Tabanka is a dance company that is black and is the only black dance company in Scandinavia, actually. We dance. Well, I don't dance with them anymore. I danced there for seven years, so it was a very big part of my 20s. And it is all about both traditional and contemporary African and Caribbean dance, that's a short version of it. The artistic director who started Tabanka studied dance, both African dances, primarily West African, but also East African and then Caribbean dances, and he looked at the similarities and looked at war dance, coming of age dances, fertility dances, like all types of dances. And then he made his own technique that he calls Talawa technique. And then his whole thing was to put that on our bodies. It started as a very big group and youth-orientated.

I joined very, very randomly. I mean, I don't believe anything in life is random. But at the time, it was extremely random. I had no thoughts of being a dancer. I just knew I liked to do it. And I used to take classes with him, and he was like, "We have an audition, you should come." I even brought my mum. I don't know why I did that. The audition was at the same place where we trained at Lambertseter fritidsklubb. It's a youth club. They have an after-

school program, the youth just go and hang out there. They have a room with mirrors that we used to train. That's where I had my audition.

I remember it was in 2009. I had already turned 19, so I think it was year 2009 or 2010 around that time. It was downstairs because they had a stage there. I remember you had to register. And I remember downstairs they had a circle and the people who were auditioning or everybody who was there went into the circle and they danced, and then you go out and back in and out again. I remember that to be extremely terrifying. I don't remember what I did, but it was very nice because it was such a safe space. I didn't feel like people were judging me or anything like that. I felt like I was part of my peers. And I had never experienced being in a black space before that. So that was a significant event or time. I met some of the members who are my best friends today.

We did that and then we went upstairs into the dance studio, the room with the mirrors and he taught us a choreography, that we had to do. You had judges, some of the group members were judges and whatnot and taking notes. It was super professional. And you also had to dance alone. I remember I had to do a solo for them. I still don't remember what I did, I don't even remember what I wore. I don't remember.

But that audition was a very big moment in my life and it set the tone for the rest of my life. Like, if I hadn't been there and gotten into the group, I don't know what type of person I would be. I have no idea. I don't know.

I've never really thought about it like that before.

7.

During the events of my time with the dance company, my activism came through my physicality. This means dancing certain dances that your ancestors were actually killed for doing. Like that is insane to me because I'm standing here in a space that I own, it's my space and I am doing something that years ago I would literally be slaughtered for. It wasn't allowed. You couldn't do any of that. Your whole cultural self was stripped. But even though you were killed for doing so, it still survived. And that is so fascinating to me. Like it's still alive to this day. Like we managed to keep that retention of it and the memory. Like the ancestral memory in our body. It's very special to me.

We would talk a lot about being black and racism and all types of stuff. And. It was extremely eye-opening to get a language to speak on these things, because I feel like black people experience a lot of the same things, but not everybody has the words to speak on it and know exactly what it is. And I feel like it's very important to know the things that have such a huge effect on your life. Your everyday life. You have a lot of ignorant black people. I feel like it's very sad that a lot of black people don't see structural oppression, or some people say "But you are just focusing on negative things." And it's not about that. You have to be aware of it to counteract it, because if you don't know what's facing you, then how are you supposed to navigate? It's

so important. I feel like language is so important, you know, to express yourself. They didn't want us to read. They didn't want us to write. So, for us to sit here and not take that shit seriously and actually try to find out what is your place here as a black person is extremely important to be aware of. what is your experience? What are other people's experiences?

Of course, being conscious, like I said, is being mad all the time. But I'm not mad. I'm very proud because I feel like existing in my body today is a statement. It's a form of resistance. I'm resisting something that is against me all the time. The system wasn't made for me, was made for you. It was made for them. But I'm still here trying to do good in the world, you know? When you learn about things like this, you are going to be sad. You are going to cry. You are going to be angry. But at the end of the day, I'm so proud to be black. Oh, my God. I am so proud to be in this skin. Even though, it can be painful. It can be a lot of things, but at the end of the day, I feel like everybody wants to be us. Honestly, we are very cool people. Black people are cool. And there's a quote by Paul Mooney that I love when he says everybody wants to be a nigger, but don't nobody want a nigger. Not everybody can live this life. Right? Right! That's why I want to empower not only myself but other people because I feel like it's such a thing to be proud of. Of course, speaking about race all the time can be very tiring. That's why it's important to also see the positive in being black. So I feel like being an activist through art and through physicality, was very important for me because that was like my gateway to where I am today.

I feel like our bodies have been so accessible or deemed as very accessible, something you can just take and own. Because we did not own our own bodies when we were enslaved. We were deemed as other people's property. It wasn't illegal to rape a black woman. It's still something that lingers today. For example, people love to touch my hair. People think that it's just okay to take their hands and literally dig in my hair. You would never do that to another white person because it would be rude. I'm not a monkey in a zoo. Right! I'm not here for your excitement. I'm not here for you to prod in and touch me.

I also feel like as a black woman, I'm hypersexualized all the time, especially if I dance because I love to go to the club. I like to do that. And I like to dance. If I'm out, I dance. I don't sit. I dance the whole night if the music is good. I love my body. I love how my body moves. I don't know why but the fact that I'm so comfortable in my own space, in my own body and the way I move, people want access to that, you know, because they don't have it, right? They might feel stiff or they might feel uncomfortable or whatever. And they view my movement as inviting. I ain't inviting you to my party. I don't know you. I don't want you to come up to me at all, and it's especially women who do that. And there was a period when I was like, do I give like a lesbian vibe, like why are all these women flocking to me? But when I think about it's more like, they often come like, "Oh my god, you're so good at dancing" and la la la. But it's almost like you're looking at me like something exotic or something that is so un-normal to you. And I don't like to be exoticified at all. I hate that. I'm not trying to be anybody's fetish. I'm not trying to be

something that you think that you have access to because you don't. And I feel like it's only because I'm black and female. Cause you're not going over to that blonde, blue-eyed person over there at all.

Men often think they have access to women in general, but I feel like as a black woman, it's more of a "oooh, you're probably good in bed", or "you're so sensual", you know what I mean? And it's extremely uncomfortable. It's unwanted attention. I don't want it. I really don't want it. I mean, if I'm approached by a guy in a respectful way, that's OK. But when it's not, I don't respond well to that at all. I'm not the person to be all shy about it. I will tell you, "Yoh, get the fuck away from me. Don't touch me. Don't do that." And I hate being touched, especially when you are in a club. I know that it can be tight, but you can still dance in your own little space. You don't have to be everywhere.

I take it back to the slave owner lusting for the beautiful black woman. And it just makes me so uncomfortable.

9.

Before I joined the dance company, I felt like even physically, I didn't really take up that much space. I mean, I've always been a big personality, but that was mainly around my closest friends. Maybe I was always outspoken, but I didn't take up much space in that sense. I wouldn't really dance or move freely. I wasn't the person who would groove to a song. I wouldn't really. I wouldn't use my body in that way. And I feel that I was a very late bloomer. So I wasn't really aware of my body until very late, like in my 20s,

I guess. Obviously, I live in a space where my body's not necessarily appreciated. I mean, everybody won't say it now, but before it wasn't appreciated. I wouldn't wear tight clothes or anything. It's not like I didn't like my body, but I didn't praise it like I would do now. So I went from not being aware of my physicality to coming to dance and having to be hyper-aware of how I move because I have to learn the steps. I have to do this, I have to stretch, I have to do yada yada yada. And then you become very aware of what your body looks like, what your body feels like, your posture. I had extremely bad posture before. Extremely bad. And even your posture makes you feel different. You take more space when you go from chin down to chin up, right? It does something to you mentally as well. So I became very aware and in a positive way, because, you know, I'm a little big or whatever, I don't know what you call it, but I wasn't fat. Because in the space I was in that was praised. In Jamaica, they loved that shit. You know, it's not something that is looked down on, it's the ideal because they want somebody who looks like they can bear children.

I also remember when I went to Jamaica to visit my grandmother at a later age after I took a year off school. That was the first time I was in Jamaica in the body that I have now. And got a lot of attention for it and, you know, that helps. I guess. So then you are aware that this is actually appreciated and I should appreciate it myself. So I went from that and now I like how my body looks, but I appreciate more the fact that my body is healthy and that I am able. Being intersectional makes you aware of the fact that some people are not able while I'm able. So I should appreciate that.

And I really appreciate it. It moves great! It moves way better than it did before because I have the confidence as well. So even if I haven't danced or I haven't been in the company for three years now, I feel happy with it. And I feel extremely liberated when I dance because I do whatever the hell I want to do.

That's something I've thought about but not necessarily expressed in words, because I feel it myself.

