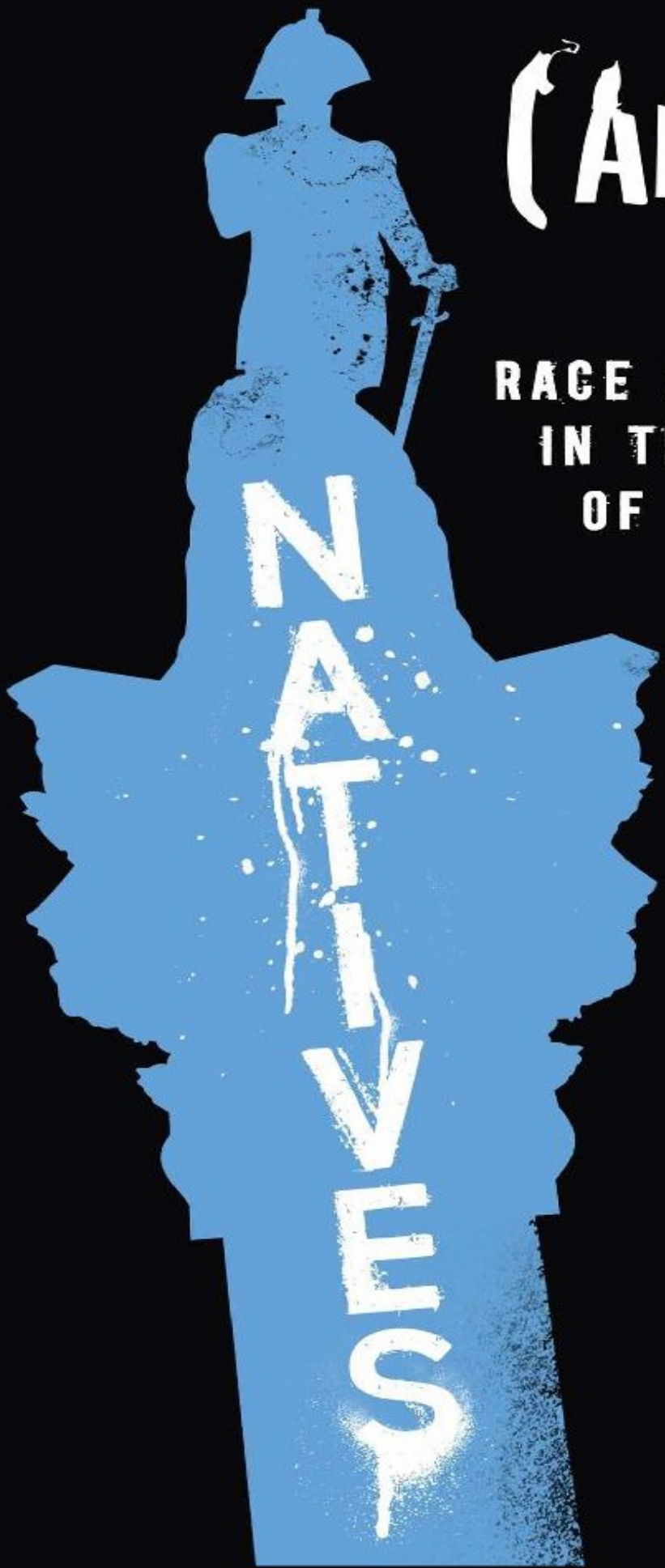

(Akala)

RACE AND CLASS IN THE RUINS OF EMPIRE

Natives

Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire

Akala

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To Uncle Offs

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1 – BORN IN THE 1980S

I was born in the 1980s and I grew up in the clichéd, single-parent working-class family. We often depended on state benefits, we lived in a council house, I ate free school meals. I am the child of a British-Caribbean father and a Scottish/English mother, my teenage parents were never married and they separated before I was born. My dad spent a portion of his childhood in and out of the care system and my mum was pretty much disowned by her father for getting with a 'nig nog'. The first time I saw someone being stabbed I was twelve, maybe thirteen, the same year I was searched by the police for the first time. I first smoked weed when I was nine and many of my 'uncles' – meaning biological uncles as well as family friends – went to prison. My upbringing was, on the face of it, typical of those of my peers who ended up meeting an early death or have spent much of their adult lives in and out of prison.

I was born in Crawley, West Sussex, but moved to Camden in north-west London before I had formed any concrete memories and I spent my childhood and teenage years living there. Camden is home to 130 languages and about as wide a divide between rich and poor as anywhere in the country. I went to school with the children of lords and ladies, millionaires, refugees, children clearly suffering from malnourishment and young boys selling drugs for their fathers. If there is anywhere in Britain that could serve as a petri dish for examining race, class and culture, Camden would be that place.

I was born in the 1980s in the 'mother country' of the British Commonwealth, the seat of the first truly global empire, the birthplace of 'the' industrial revolution and the epicentre of global finance. What does this mean? What are the social and historical forces that even allowed my parents to meet? My father is the British-born child of two African-Jamaican migrant workers who came to the mother country as part of the Windrush generation. My mother was an army child, born in Germany, spending her infant years in Hong Kong and moving to the small town in which I was born in her early teens. In my parents' meeting are untold histories of imperial conquest, macroeconomic change, slave revolts, decolonisation and workers'

struggles. I was born poor, by Western standards at least. I was born poor and racialised as black – despite my 'white' mother – in perhaps the most tumultuous decade of Britain's domestic racial history.

I was born in the 1980s, before mixed-race children had become an acceptable fashion accessory. A nurse in the hospital promised to give my white mother 'nigger blood' when she needed a transfusion after giving birth; yeah, the 1980s was a decade bereft of political correctness.

The 1980s was also the decade of Thatcherite–Reaganite ascendency. The 'golden age of capitalism' had ended in 1973, and the 80s saw the start of the rollback of the post-war welfare state, increased sell-off of public assets and the embrace of an individualistic 'self-made' logic by the very generation that had become wealthy with the support of free universities and cheap council houses, and had literally been kept alive by the newly constructed National Health Service. The decade saw the most powerful military machine ever assembled spun into existential crisis by the enormous threat posed by the potential of a socialist revolution on the tiny little Caribbean island of Grenada, and the self-appointed captains of global democracy could be found backing genocidal regimes from Nicaragua to South Africa – though that could've been any decade, really. It was the decade Thomas Sankara was killed, the Berlin Wall fell, Michael Jackson started to turn white and the MOVE movement was bombed from the sky. The 1980s were fairly eventful, to say the least.

For black Britain, the decade began with the New Cross fire/massacre of 1981, a suspected racist arson attack at 439 New Cross Road, where Yvonne Ruddock was celebrating her sixteenth birthday party.[1] Thirteen of the partygoers burned to death, including the birthday girl, and one of the survivors also later committed suicide. Many of the families of the dead have maintained to this day that a) it was an arson attack and b) the police bungled the investigation and treated the families of the dead like suspects instead of victims. The community's suspicion that it was an arson attack was perfectly reasonable, given that it came in the wake of a string of such racist arson attacks in that area of south-east London.[2] The prime minister did not even bother to offer condolences to what were apparently British children and their families. Of course, Thatcher could not, in her heart of hearts, express sympathy for black British children while supporting an apartheid government rooted in the idea that black people were subhuman, so at least she was consistent. There certainly was not going to be a minute's silence and most of Britain is completely unaware it even happened, despite

the New Cross fire being one of the largest single losses of life in post-war Britain.

The same year also saw the passing of the British Nationality Act, the last of a series of Acts that were passed from 1962 onwards and whose racialised motivations were barely disguised. British Caribbeans had come to learn that they were indeed second-class citizens – as many had long suspected – but they were not of a mood to be quiet and keep their heads down about it. New Cross led to the largest demonstration by black people in British history; 20,000 marched on parliament on a working weekday and foretold of the harsh realities of the decade to come: 'Blood a go run, if justice na come' was the chant. It was to prove prophetic.

The rest of the decade of my birth was punctuated by uprisings and disturbances in almost all of the Caribbean and 'Asian' areas of the country, as well as the miners' strikes of 1984–85 and the constant presence of the anti-apartheid struggle. These 'disturbances' included the infamous Brixton riots of 1981, set off by the sus laws – a resurrection of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, these laws allowed people to be arrested on the mere suspicion that they *intended* to commit a crime – and their manifestation in Swamp81, a racialised mass stop-and-search police campaign.

Brixton burned again in 1985, set aflame by the police shooting and paralysing Cherry Groce. Just a week later, the death of Cynthia Jarret after a police raid on her home sparked the Broadwater Farm riots, where a police officer was killed. I know members of both families personally, and grew up with the son of Smiley Culture, the reggae artist who died during a police raid on his home in 2011. I mention these connections only to point out that these people are not abstractions or mere news items, but members of a community, our community. Dalian Atkinson, the former Premier League footballer, was tasered to death by the police in 2016; it's hard to imagine a former pop star or a retired footballer from any other community in Britain dying after contact with the police.

These 1980s reactions to state violence, racism, poverty and class conflict were by no means limited to London; there was the St Paul's riot in Bristol in 1980, Moss Side and Toxteth in the north-west of England in 1981, Handsworth in the Midlands in 1981 and 1985 and Chapletown in Leeds in 1981 and 1987. How many millions of pounds of damage these outpourings of rage caused I don't know, but now that they are sufficiently distant from the present, very few academics would dispute that they had very real socio-political causes. Indeed, entire books have been written on them, and government policy and police behaviour and training were reformed in

direct response to these events, though what lessons the British state has truly learned from the 1980s remains to be seen.

It's easy for people just slightly younger than myself, and born into a relative degree of multiculturalism, to forget just how recently basic public decency towards black folks was won in this country, but I was born in the 80s so I remember only too well. I was five years old when the infamous picture was taken of footballer John Barnes, kicking away the banana that had been thrown at him from the stands. I grew up routinely watching some of England's greatest ever football players suffer this type of humiliation in their workplace, in front of tens of thousands of people, who for the most part seemed to find it entirely acceptable, funny even. I knew Cyril Regis personally (rest in power, sir), I know about the bullets in the post and the death threats received by black players from their 'own' supporters and apparent countrymen because they wanted to play for England. No one asked in public discourse where that association with black people and monkeys came from, because if they did we might have to speak of historical origins, of savage myths and of literal human zoos.

I was not born with an opinion of the world but it clearly seemed that the world had an opinion of people like me. I did not know what race and class supposedly were but the world taught me very quickly, and the irrational manifestations of its prejudices forced me to search for answers. I did not particularly want to spend a portion of a lifetime studying these issues, it was not among my ambitions as a child, but I was compelled upon this path very early, as I stared at Barnsey kicking away that banana skin or when I sat in the dark and the freezing cold simply because my mum did not make enough money. I knew that these experiences were significant but I was not yet sure how to tease meaning from them.

I was born in the 1980s, when MPs in parliament could be found arguing that we – non-white Commonwealth citizens – should be sent back to where we came from. Now that where we came from had legally ceased to be part of Britain, our very existence here was seen as the problem. So, after our grandmothers had helped build the National Health Service and our grandfathers had staffed the public transport system, British MPs could openly talk about repatriation – we were no longer needed, excess labour, surplus to requirements, of no further use to capital. The entire management of 'race' – the media propaganda, the overstaffed mental institutions, the severe unemployment, the massively disproportionate incarceration rates and school expulsions – has to be understood in the context of why we were invited here in the first place. It was not so that we, en masse, could access the best of what British society had to offer, because that was not even on

offer to the majority of the white population at the time. We were invited here to do the menial work that needed doing in the years immediately following the Second World War, and even in that very limited capacity, all post-war governments – including Attlee's spirit of 45 lot – were deeply concerned about the long-term effects of letting brown-skinned British citizens into the country.

The government and the education system failed to explain to white Britain that, as the academic Adam Elliot-Cooper puts it, we had not come to Britain, but 'rather that Britain had come to us'. They did not explain that the wealth of Britain, which made the welfare state and other class ameliorations possible, was derived in no small part from the coffee and tobacco, cotton and diamonds, gold and sweat and blood and death of the colonies. No one explained that our grandparents were not immigrants, that they were literally British citizens –many of them Second World War veterans – with British passports to match, moving from one of Britain's outposts to the metropole. Nobody told white Britain that, over there in the colonies, Caribbeans and Asians were being told that Britain was their mother country, that it was the home of peace and justice and prosperity and that they would be welcomed with open arms by their loving motherland. Similarly, no one told my grandparents and others over there in the colonies that most white Britons were actually poor, or that the UK had a history of brutal labour exploitation and class conflict at home. You see, out there in the colonies, whiteness implies aristocracy, whiteness is aspirational, and as the only white people my grandparents knew of in Jamaica were the ruling classes, this association was entirely rational. My uncle could not contain his shock when 'me come a England and me cyan believe say white man a sweep street'; the illusion was ruined the moment his four-year-old self got off the boat in the 1950s and saw poor white people. How preposterous – what is this place?

Within a week, my uncle also discovered that he was a black bastard – some adult let him know while he was in the sweet shop. You see, while the people in the colonies were being told Britain was their mother, much of white Britain had convinced itself that these undeserving niggers – Asians were niggers too, back then – had just got off their banana boats to come and freeload, to take 'their' jobs and steal 'their' women. Never mind that Britain has a German royal family, a Norman ruling elite, a Greek patron saint, a Roman/Middle Eastern religion, Indian food as its national cuisine, an Arabic/Indian numeral system, a Latin alphabet and an identity predicated on a multi-ethnic, globe-spanning empire – 'fuck the bloody foreigners'. Never mind that waves of migration have been a constant in British history

and that great many millions of 'white' Britons are themselves descendants of Jewish, Eastern European and Irish migrants of the nineteenth century,[3] nor that even in the post-war 'mass migration' years, Ireland and Europe were the largest source of immigrants.[4] And, of course, let's say nothing about the millions of British emigrants, settlers and colonists abroad – conveniently labelled 'expats'.

The reaction to our grandparents, and even more to their British-born children, was one of general and irrational revulsion, such that the mere mention of their treatment is sure to elicit rage and embarrassment today, now that the pioneering Windrush generation has officially become part of Britain's national story. These people who came to labour in post-war Britain were greeted by de facto segregation, verbal abuse, violent attacks and even murder, motivated by nothing more than their brown and black skin. Immigration acts put a stop to the British citizenship claims of the non-white Commonwealth, and hundreds of millions of British citizens were stripped of their citizenship and the freedom of movement that a British passport gave them, simply because they were not white. In a barely disguised move in the 1968 and 1971 immigration acts 'grandfather clauses' were placed into the legislation, which allowed the white citizens of the Commonwealth to continue to keep their freedom of movement without having to use explicitly racial language.[5]

Despite all this, my grandfather Brinsley worked hard, saved his pennies and moved out to the suburbs. Everything British capitalism says a good worker should do for the system to reward them – which, to be fair, it obviously did in his case. His neighbours all signed a petition to have the nigger removed from the street but my granddad, for reasons I could never quite understand, chose to stay put. As a homeowner surrounded by council tenants he could not be moved. My grandmother, Millicent, also saved her pennies and bought a home, but she stayed in London. This was all back when a worker in London could have any hope at all of buying their home; soaring house prices have permanently put an end to that.

The 1980s drew to a close with the Hillsborough disaster, in which ninety-six people were crushed to death during an FA Cup semi-final game between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the national press and police blamed the Liverpool fans for the disaster, relying on crude class stereotypes of them as drunk hooligans. The *Sun* went as far as claiming that some fans were pickpocketing the dead and that others had urinated on the police; to this day people in Liverpool boycott the paper as a result. After twenty-seven years of tireless family campaigning, an inquest

finally reached a verdict of unlawful killing that laid the blame for the deaths at the doors of the police.

So where are we now? Has nothing at all changed since the decade I was born? While it's obviously true that aristocratic privilege and whiteness are among the basic assumptions of British ruling-class ideology, it's also obvious that Britain's inner cities – London in particular – are now some of the most successfully multi-ethnic experiments in the 'Western' world, despite what the right-wing press would like to pretend. Multi-ethnic Britain is a result of what scholar Paul Gilroy calls our 'convivial' culture, the normal everyday decency of ordinary people that for the most part keeps the peace in the face of enormous challenges.[6] Racism and anti-racism, complete contempt for the poor and Christian charity, home to the world's top universities and a strong disdain for learning, the pioneer of 'Anglo-globalisation' whose citizens constantly bemoan other peoples right to move freely without a hint of irony – Britain has long been a land of startling paradoxes. For example, why did Britain have an abolitionist movement on a far greater scale than any of the other major European slaveholding powers, even while Britain had become the premier slave trader? Why, two centuries later, was there such revulsion towards and organisation against apartheid by 'radical' groups here, even as 'our' government, British corporations and banks supported it? (Though the British struggle against apartheid in Britain was not without its own racial tensions, ironically.[7])

Britain has two competing traditions – one rooted in ideas of freedom, equality and democracy, and another that sees these words as mere rhetoric to be trotted out at will and violated whenever it serves the Machiavellian purposes of power preservation. This is how the UK can have the largest of the demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq and yet still have a government that entirely ignored its population on an issue with such globe-shifting implications.

Severe class inequalities persist, and while it's probably unrealistic to expect a society with which everyone can be satisfied, by European standards the British class system is still particularly pernicious. It's not that racism has disappeared from the UK since the 1980s, but without a doubt the resistance of black and Asian communities during the decade of my birth produced very significant reforms that have changed the way my generation experiences and understands 'race'. The gollywogs and banana skins are no longer a daily feature of black life here and neither is the Special Patrol Group, the notoriously abusive policing unit that gave almost all of the older men in my life a bloody good hiding, more than once. Though police

brutality of course continues, few would deny things are far better in this respect than thirty years ago, for now at least.

The physical battles fought by our parents' generation have meant that 'nigger hunting' and 'Paki bashing' are far less common than they once were too. My father's and uncles' bodies are tattooed with scars from fighting the National Front (NF), Teddy Boys and Skinheads; mine is not. We should not underestimate the newly emboldened bigots, though, and racist violence seems to be on the rise again.

This is partly because, despite much seeming and some very real progress, public discourse about racism is still as childish and supine as it ever was. Where we do discuss race in public, we have been trained to see racism – if we see it at all – as an issue of interpersonal morality. Good people are not racist, only bad people are. This neat binary is a great way of avoiding any real discussion at all. But without the structural violence of unequal treatment before the law and in education, and a history of racial exploitation by states, simple acts of personal prejudice would have significantly less meaning. In short, we are trained to recognise the kinds of racism that tend to be engaged in by poorer people. Thus even the most pro-empire of historians would probably admit that some football hooligan calling a Premier League player a 'black cunt' is a bad thing, even while they spend their entire academic careers explaining away, downplaying and essentially cheering for the mass-murdering white-supremacist piracy of the British Empire, which starved millions to death in India, enslaved and tortured millions more in countless locations and often used its power to crush, not enhance, popular democracy and economic development in its non-white colonies, especially when doing so suited larger aims.[8] Poor people racism, bad, rich people racism, good.

The kinds of racism still engaged in by the wealthy and the powerful – such as the theft of entire regions' resources under a thinly veiled update of 'the white man's burden' (basically 'the savages can't govern themselves'), or profiteering from a racially unjust legal and prison system – are far more egregious and damaging. Yet these forms of racism are given far less attention than racism as simple name-calling. John Terry calling Anton Ferdinand a 'black cunt' in front of millions of viewers may well be deplorable, but the Football Association's and England management's subsequent equivocation over whether to take him to the 2012 European Championships, over Anton's brother Rio, and for England as a nation to be happy and proud to be captained by a man who racially abuses his peers in the workplace, is the more interesting case study for any discussion about

how race operates. Had the England team chosen to drop John Terry immediately and pick Rio instead, I'm sure there would have been uproar from much of the country, despite Rio's obvious abilities.

In the run-up to the 2017 general election, online racists told black MP Diane Abbott that they would 'hang her if they could find a tree strong enough for the fat black bitch' – just one message among the slew of racist and sexist abuse she regularly receives. It seems Britain's most honest racists emphasise the spiritual connection they feel for their American cousins quite well. Yet in reality, the hanging of black people was never a particular phenomenon in domestic Britain; ironically, the vast majority of people hung in British history were white, and they were often poor people hung by the state for not respecting rich people's property.[9] Oh the irony, oh the lack of respect for one's own ancestors!

All said and done, the idea of racial hierarchy and the attendant philosophy of innate white superiority were not invented by poor people, and while we are not excusing the central role that everyday racism has played in upholding racial hierarchies in the UK and elsewhere, our critique should not rest there.

While ethnic bigotry has been around for millennia and probably affects every known human community to some degree, the invention, or at least codification, of 'race' was an eighteenth and nineteenth century pan-Euro-American project, in which British intellectuals played a central role. Britain also had a pioneering role in making white supremacy a temporary political reality via its racialised global empire, yet to publicly discuss racism, much less have the gall to accurately name white supremacy as a strong current in Britain's history, is to be greeted with odium by some who claim to study that history, but it seems would rather be left to uncritically celebrate it in peace.

But what am *I* 'complaining' about, you might justifiably ask? Have I not, after all, had quite a good life so far, all things told? Yes, indeed, despite these historic forces and the kind of household I was born into, here I stand, a self-employed entrepreneur my entire adult life, an independent artist who has toured the world many times over and someone who barely went to college yet who has lectured at almost every university in the country. I come from one of the statistically least likely groups to attain five GCSE passes – white and 'mixed-race' boys on free school meals fail at an even greater rate than 'fully black' boys on free school meals do – but I got ten GCSEs, including multiple A* grades. I took my maths GCSE a year early and attended the Royal Institution's Mathematics masterclasses as a schoolboy.

Am I unique? Do I have some special sauce that has made me different from so many of my peers? Surely my very existence proves Britain is meritocratic, and that if you just work hard you'll 'make it'? If there is a UK equivalent of the 'American Dream', aren't I one small example of its manifestation? Not only me, but my siblings too; my older sister is Ms. Dynamite, whom I'm sure you've heard of, one of my younger sisters is an award winning stuntwoman called Belle Williams who has worked on some of the biggest films ever made, my sixteen-year-old brother also just also got ten GCSEs and currently wants to be a neuroscientist. Isn't my successful, rags to halfway riches 'mixed race' family further living proof of the very social mobility that I am claiming is mostly fictional?

If only things were so simple. If only exceptions did not prove the rule.

The purpose of this book is to examine how these seemingly impersonal forces – race and class – have impacted and continue to shape our lives, and how easily I could now be telling you a very different but much more common story of cyclical violence, prison and part-time, insecure and low-paying work.

You see, alongside the familiar tropes and trappings of inner-city life, I also had many unusual things stacked in my favour: I went to a special pan-African Saturday school that made up for what my state schooling lacked; my stepdad was the stage manager of the Hackney Empire, thus I saw more theatre growing up than any rich child is likely to; I had politicised and militantly pro-education parents who were always willing to fight my corner against teachers, whenever and wherever necessary. Some of my happiest childhood memories were formed in the public library that was almost on the corner of our street, a facility that played no small part in inculcating in me an almost irrational love of books. I already own more books than I could ever read, yet I often still go to bookshops just to look at, browse and smell the pages of a freshly printed one – sadly nerdy, I know. Had I not had access to free public libraries courtesy of the taxpayer, and a mum willing and able to take me, this book you hold probably would never have been written. Yet, despite all of this, I still carried a knife out of fear and flirted with petty crime after I had left school.

Black consciousness did not save me from carrying a knife, and nor could it protect me in the streets, but it certainly shaped my sense of self-worth and imbued me with a community-oriented moral compass. It would be easy for me to ignore these factors and claim myself to be a 'self-made' man, but in reality there is no such thing.

Countless teachers and community activists gave me the tools for navigating life's roadmap; football coaches taught me to play and kept me

out of trouble. I am not saying that my own hard work, discipline and sacrifice have played no role in my life's outcomes; that would be absurd. But I am saying that even these characteristics were nourished with help, support and encouragement from others, and that without this support – much of it from volunteers – it's inconceivable that I would be where I am today. When I say I could have been a statistic – another working-class black man dead or in prison – people who did not grow up how we grew up probably think it an exaggeration. But people that grew up like us know just how real this statement is, just how easily the scales could have been tipped.

Yes, I grew up without my father in the home, but we kept in contact and I went to stay with him and his new family many a school holiday. My stepdad was also a very positive influence in my life before he and my mother had a difficult split and, reflecting the unusual mix of cultures that is normal in Camden, I even had an 'uncle' from Cyprus called Andrew, who looked out for me all through my teenage years. But of all the men in my life, it is my godfather, 'Uncle Offs', the man to whom this book is dedicated, who made the biggest impact on my upbringing. While he was technically just a family friend, he has played a greater role in my life than many parents do in the lives of their own children. He was so close to my parents, and loved me and my siblings so much, that when my mum got cancer he agreed to let us live with him if she died, despite the fact that he had three children of his own and lived on a council estate in Hackney. I often wonder where men like my Uncle Offs fit in to the stereotype of the supposedly ubiquitously absent black father.

There were other benefits too that, while not exclusive to my family, are an inescapable part of our narrative. I got the measles aged five and I got treatment, for free. My mum got cancer when I was ten; she got treatment, also for free, and both courtesy of the NHS. I went on subsidised school trips to Rome and Barcelona that greatly expanded my horizons. In another time and space, someone born into my socio-economic bracket would have had to drop out of school and work to help feed the family; indeed, one of my best friends, the legendary Brazilian hip hop artist MC Marechal, had to do just that, as do countless children all across the world today through no fault of their own, just because of the lottery of birth. I am partly a product of Britain's injustices, of its history of class and race oppression, but also of its counter-narrative of struggle and the compromises made by those in power born of those struggles. I am a product of the empire, and also of the welfare state.

My age group, born in the early 1980s, find ourselves in a kind of black limbo; we are the last set of black Brits old enough to remember the old-

school racism, though we only witnessed it as children as our parents comprehensively defeated it, in the major cities at least. While the generation born in 1981 is far poorer than those born in 1971 for the general population,[10] the narrative is more complicated for black people. Some of my generation, like me, have had opportunities afforded us that might have been far less likely had we been born just a decade earlier, and black British music in particular has a public international profile it has never had before. Millions of people from all communities right across the country care more about what Stormzy and Jme think about the world than their politicians, and the central role played by the Grime4Corbyn campaign in shifting the centre ground in British politics will no doubt inspire a slew of PhDs at some point in the future, if it hasn't already.

The changes brought by reform manifest in odd ways.

When I rented my first nice flat, I had a disagreement with the black man working at the estate agent after he told me, 'You should feel lucky, because coloured folks like us never usually get these kinds of opportunities.' Obviously it's an extreme example of self-hatred to think it is a privilege for black people to be able to give away thousands of pounds of their hard-earned money, but as more young black people in London and elsewhere become materially successful, it will complicate class–race dynamics and continue to challenge people's expectations.

I remember back in 2011 I was getting ready to interview a legendary black poet and activist for a programme I presented on Channel 4 called *Life of Rhyme* and, as myself and the crew finished setting up, he asked 'Where is the producer?' I pointed to the black woman with me. He then asked, 'Where is the director?' I pointed to the black man with me. The interviewee paused, then said 'Wow, in my day you would have never have gotten that' – an all-black film crew, that is. Of course, one only has to walk into the BBC, C4, or any major corporation to see that this is not a generalized trend; their staffs do not even close to accurately reflect the ethnic composition of the city in which they are situated. But nonetheless, if a poet whose entire career has been spent fighting racism can find himself looking for the 'white person in charge', it gives us a sense of the degree to which reality has conditioned our expectations, even in London. (To be fair to him, there *were* actually white people in charge of the production, as senior directors and producers, they just happened to not be with us that day.)

What both the poet and the confused estate agent were commenting on is the fact that there is a visible nascent black middle class on a scale that there just wasn't with our parents' generation. The trend is reflected in some of the

occupations of my friend group – a classical composer, a university professor, a W10 bar owner, a trauma surgeon and a couple of lawyers, all second or third-generation black Brits. Though we should not wrap ourselves in joy just as yet, as the changing nature of my friends' occupations could also be seen to reflect the general closing of 'British' industry, and these exceptional cases sit alongside the ever-deepening reality of a black underclass that is in the process of permanently joining the much older white underclass. This process has been chronicled in the press obsession with gangs, and with making gangs synonymous with young black boys, despite the obvious fact that violent working-class youth gangs have been part of British history for well over a century, and despite the fact that they are still prevalent in areas of the country where there are hardly any black people, such as Glasgow, Durham, Cleveland, Belfast and most other decaying, post-industrial centres of deprivation.

Of course, a few successful black people also do very little to alter the race–class dynamics of the UK and can even help to cement it. These successes can and will be used – even sometimes by the 'middle class' respectable black people themselves – to beat other poor people that 'didn't make it' over the head. They can be used to pretend that the system is just and there are enough seats at the table – 'if you just work hard and pull your socks up you can be like me' – rather than simply being honest about the way things actually work. Most people, it seems to me at least, hate poor people more than they hate poverty.

This is classic, the old pull yourself up by the bootstraps trope. It ignores that people are not inherently good or bad, and that even 'bad' decisions are made in a context. For example, my aforementioned gangster uncles universally encouraged me to stay in school, paid me pocket money for reciting the theory of evolution to them as a child and even threatened to give me a bloody good hiding if I tried to be like them – i.e. a criminal. My good friend, a retired Premier League footballer from the notorious Stonebridge estate, was officially banned from the 'front line' by all the drug dealers in 'the ends' when he was growing up. They saw his potential, his chance for a life different to their own, and these 'bad' people – I am not denying that they were indeed hardened criminals – protected him and me.

Meanwhile, some of my white, middle-class teachers made my school life extremely difficult and penalised me for the very thing they were supposed to be nurturing; my intelligence. Law enforcement acted upon my body based on media-induced hysteria regardless of my school grades, my absolute geekiness and the fact that I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up. We judge the street corner hustler or working-class criminal – from East

Glasgow to East London – but we see a job as an investment banker, even in firms that launder the profits of drug cartels, fund terrorism, aid the global flow of arms, fuel war, oil spills, land grabs and generally fuck up the planet, as a perfectly legitimate, even aspirational occupation. I am not even necessarily passing judgment on those who are employed in that system, as I'm complicit in it to a degree because of my consumption, I am just pointing out that our evaluation of what constitutes 'crime' is not guided by morality, it is guided by the law; in other words, the rules set down by the powerful, not a universal barometer of justice – if such a thing even exists. We need not remind ourselves that slavery, apartheid, Jim Crow, a man's right to rape his wife and the chemical castration of gay people were all 'legal' at one stage of very recent history, as was most of what was done by Nazi Germany.

This 'if you just pull your socks up' trope also ignores the reality that many Britons (and people around the globe) are poor and getting poorer through no fault of their own under austerity – the technical term for class robbery. Can a nurse whose pay increases are capped at 1 per cent – below the rate of inflation – by politicians who have not capped their own pay, change the fact that he or she is literally getting poorer every passing year, despite doing the same bloody hard work?

So yes, in one sense we have come a long way since the 1980s. The much maligned 'political correctness' has made it far more difficult for bigots to just say as they please without consequence; there are fewer bullets in the post; we have even gotten used to an England football team that is consistently half full of black players and we even have a few black politicians and a Muslim mayor of London.

Yet despite these enormous changes, the essential problems are still with us and we look increasingly set for a re-run of the 1980s in twenty-first century clothes. The national riots of 2011, sparked by the police's failure to properly engage with the family and community of Mark Duggan after having shot him dead, bear obvious echoes of the past. The media's decision, in the crucial first forty-eight hours after the incident, to unquestioningly parrot the police's version of events that Mark had shot at them first showed that the workings of state power and mainstream media have altered very little in the intervening decades.

The horrendous Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017, which claimed at least seventy-one lives and was undeniably caused by systematic contempt for the lives of poor people, was perhaps the ultimate and most gruesome tribute to austerity yet seen. The state's reaction, or total lack of reaction, in the days after the fire versus the overwhelming outpouring of public support was one of the strangest things I have ever seen with my own eyes. The slew of racist

abuse and virulent hate that can be found in any thread online discussing the Grenfell victims – who happened to be disproportionately Muslims – and the conceptual linking of the dead families to the terrorists at London Bridge and Manchester in the previous months speaks loudly of how 'Muslim' has become a racialised, culturally essentialist category in twenty-first century Britain. At the time of writing, seven months after the fire, most of the surviving families still have not been re-housed, even after the collection of millions of pounds of donations in their names and despite the fact that the local council is known to have £300 million in cash reserves. I lived on the same street as Grenfell for five years, but my building had sprinklers, working fire alarms, extinguishers and a maintenance man who came to check in every few months. Just a little bit of money can be the difference between life and death, even on the same London street.

There are other signs that the political 'logic' of the 1980s is returning. Despite the fact that Britain imprisons its population at double the rate the Germans do and 30–40 per cent higher than the French, we have a Metropolitan Police chief calling for tougher sentences for 'teenage thugs' and for a return of mass stop and search. Britain's prison population has already grown 82 per cent in three decades with 50 per cent more women in prison than in the 1990s, and there is no corresponding rise in serious crime to explain any of this.[11] If tougher sentences alone worked to reduce crime, the USA would surely be crime free by now? With 10 per cent of Britain's prisons now privatised and many more using prison labour, such seemingly illogical right-wing virtue signalling from the head of London's police starts to look like 'vested interests' and to signal tumultuous times ahead. We all know that black Brits – already seven times more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts, and already more harshly treated at every level of the justice system – are going to make up a disproportionate amount of any further increase in Britain's incarceration state.[12] Poor people of all ethnicities will make up most of the rest.

Other recent globe-shifting events in the Anglo-American empire – the recorded execution of Black Americans by the police, including women, children and the elderly; the election as US President of a man openly endorsed by Nazis, the KKK and white supremacist groups and his failure to condemn them even after they murder people; the same man's condemnation of the peaceful protest of Colin Kaepernick and other athletes; the ethnocentric and racist strains to the Brexit campaign rhetoric; the unjust deportations of Commonwealth migrants; the handling of and reporting on 'the migrant crisis' (without reference to Nato's destruction of