

Young, gifted, black...and very confused

Is Britain today a bastion of tolerance, a model of multicultural living? Or just another battleground in the war on white supremacy? At street level, leading British novelist Diran Adebayo finds truth in both extremes

[Race in Britain - Observer special](#)

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A Sunday night, recently. I've just come back from an overseas trip and I'm on the Tube from Heathrow, heading for north London. A white working-class guy, sharply dressed - black Moschino jacket, smart white jeans tapering down to brown shoes - perches opposite me. We sit there, label-rich clothes, legs apart, balls out, as is the manly fashion - pretty similar styles, I guess.

As we pass Kensington a japing tourist pulls the emergency cord, and the white guy gets up and hurls abuse at him for the delay he's caused. Most of our rather genteel fellow passengers look embarrassed or even frightened by the extent of his venom while he starts looking around the carriage for approval. His eyes alight on me and he smiles. Warmly, intimately. His smile says: 'I know you, your kind. Your kind and mine are close, not like these others. Your men are tough, real men, the type who'll appreciate the action I just took.'

I nod to him in a neutral manner, then return to my paper. But he won't stop, this one. He struts up and raises his fist in a black-Brit 'Touch Me!' greeting. I fist his fist and he drops down beside and starts chatting nineteen to the dozen.

This is Brixton, man. Aren't you afraid?

Emerging at Seven Sisters station, Tottenham, one of Britain's blacker neighbourhoods - which is to say around 50 per cent - I see a trashy, drunken middle-aged white woman scuttling across the busy High Road for a bus. 'Raasclaat!' she exclaims as a speeding car all but takes off her foot. 'Raasclaat' is a Jamaican swear-word...

Touching fists, an instinctive 'Raasclaat' - this doesn't come from tuning into Ali G ; this goes deeper.

A few days later I'm driving up a south London road with a black female friend. A nice car comes from the other direction and we both slow down to inch past each other. As he passes me, the driver, a white guy I see now, with a fine black woman alongside, gives me an earful. I don't hear most of what he's shouting - it takes a few moments to sink in that he's talking to me, and then to recover from the shock of this.

White timidity around black people, you see, is something you expect in 'street' situations in most parts of London. Only the week before I'd been held up on a Tube escalator, thick with City commuters. I looked down to see what the problem was, to find a black street-looking youth standing disdainfully on the wrong side. People were looking vexed, but no one did anything about it. It had gone against me that day, but I can usually rely on white middle-class timidity to ease my passage around town: to cut through traffic, say, or grab the spare seat on a teeming train.

So I'm surprised. I don't think a white lad has spoken like this to me in a one-on-one situation since the mid-Eighties. I've had my hair shorn that day and, with the barber's little razor cuts adorning my dome, I'm looking at my baddest. 'This is Brixton, man, blackhead central,' I'm thinking. 'Aren't you afraid of me? Don't you know our reputation? Don't you read the papers?'

We decide, my friend and I, as I drive on, that he must be one of these alpha males. Top car, top job. 'Hell, I've even got one one of your top women, so what can you say to me, fool?' seemed to be the size of it. This is a worrying, hypermodern development. With white timidity no longer guaranteed, I may have to rethink my whole *modus vivendi*!

Not to mention my love life. With these race thoughts buzzing, I meet up with an ex for a drink. We had what I thought was a good thing a while back and now, after ups and downs elsewhere, I have decided it is her I need in my life. She's a black girl who grew up, untypically, in rural England. A happy type.

The evening - well, the half-hour - is a disaster. I've hardly sat down when she starts. She's heard on the grapevine that I want to get back with her, so she puts me straight on a few things: our old relationship brought her down after a while, drained her vivacity. Me and my circle of friends were too much on the race trip, she adds, too cynical about Britain. Race isn't a priority for her. When we started we used to do spontaneous things together, she says - going to various places, but the places we visited shrunk after a time. Race, in short, has made me boring, she says.

As she talks, I am thinking that our conversation confirms something I have recently begun to twig - how there's an increasing number of black and mixed-race people out there who associate other black people with difficulty, with issues about and around Britain that they themselves aren't feeling. It's ironic, her saying race is not a priority for her, though. This was what attracted me to her in the first place.

Confused? I am, Britain is too...

What these incidents tell me is that when we talk about race in Britain, there are no grand narratives we can easily point to. New trends and new knowledge jostle with old fears. One black boy's 'cynicism' is another black girl's 'he doth protest too much'. Age and where you live affect your viewpoint. But, even among generally more optimistic younger people, The Observer poll suggests that almost as many think racial tension is increasing as think it's decreasing. I'm sure that, for many of our respondents, their answers are born of what happened to them last week or last month.

That nasty look in the street... was that racism or not?

Race, certainly for those who live in multiracial parts of this island, is mainly felt, and understood, at the daily level, via those little encounters in shops and on buses; that conversation you had with an African or Indian or white English person at work or in a bar the other day, that last girlfriend or boyfriend you had, and how it made you feel differently about their kind; that nasty look from that shopkeeper - now was that race, or not?

On hearing the 'alpha male' anecdote above, my ex would probably say it had nothing to do with race, and everything to do with the stresses of London driving; and that my black youth on the escalator was nothing to do with white timidity, and all to do with British reticence. And possibly she'd be right. Determining what is and isn't a race issue is a tricky business.

We live in a country whose most enduring national myth is that it is a beacon of fairness. Ask Britons to think of the defining British characteristics, and many locate them in an instinctive sense of tolerance, fairness, moderation. There is a feeling I've often picked up from various strands of white Britain that they feel themselves above racism. This comes with a correlating discomfort when faced with something like the Lawrence inquiry. Of course they'd acknowledge that there are racist 'fringe elements' here, but they feel that racism is generally un-British.

Travelling through Europe, you realise that this country is nearer to peace, and all the ease and comfort which that brings, than most others. In German, Dutch, Portuguese towns, black populations are still on the fringes of their societies. They haven't 'broken through' in the way we evidently have here. They can still look a bit nervous around town, a hunted look in their eyes. They still have that refugee vibe in their

look, their walk. But in Britain, in the cities, black folk walk like princes and princesses, like we've got rights in this joint. Which, of course, we have.

Outside the black centres of population, it's a different story, but still often a pleasant one. In Cumbria, where I spent time last year, in Edinburgh where I was this summer for the festival, you notice a certain look from many young white people. You go into a McDonald's, and they're there in their baseball caps and baggy trousers, and they give you this look. It's not threatening - it's a look of interest. The black British writer Mike Phillips noted something similar in his recent piece, *At Home In England*. 'Nowadays,' he wrote, 'moving through the "white" areas of the country, what I feel is far from the anxiety of the past. Instead I have the curious sense that I am in areas which have stayed stuck in the past.' This feeling, he senses, 'is overwhelmingly shared by the bulk of residents in the districts where it is a rarity to see a black or an Asian face.'

It's as if the people in white England know that 'mixed-up' England might be the future, and they are interested in finding out about this 'coming thing'.

Curiosity, sadly, is not universal. A couple of days after 11 September, I saw a gang of young black and white Britons abusing three Muslim women in Stratford, east London. One of the effects of 11 September has been a greater Asian - especially Muslim - visibility. A visibility that contrasts with one of the intriguing facets of the Asian story in this country. By and large, and certainly compared with blacks, Asians have been invisible.

Things are changing a little now but still you hardly ever see Asians in adverts, for example, whereas we're always popping up as one of Jamie Oliver's friends, or singing songs in cars. We have agitated more for representation and images of ourselves. We have integrated more, while Asians have been content to do their own 'invisible' thing, as indeed have myriad other smaller non-white communities. I have for a long time gained a sense from white people that we are liked more than Asians, no doubt because we are seen as being less 'alien' - most of us are Christian, Caribbeans have British names, our foods are less 'stinky' than theirs (though curries of course are popular).

So when we talk about race, we're torn between stereotypes ruthlessly deployed and seeking out the particular. And, seeking the particular, should not race talk really be class talk? For instance, most of the Caribbeans who came here in the Fifties came to do working-class jobs, whereas most of the west Africans who came a little later, my parents' generation, came as students or to take on graduate employment. The Punjabis and Gujeratis and east African Asians, so responsible for the 'Asian economic success', tended to have quite different class backgrounds from the Bengalis of London's Tower Hamlets, the country's most deprived borough, or from the Pakistanis of Oldham. But many white Britons don't know this, can't tell us apart; they just see blacks and Asians.

And so, what with black people being associated with 'the street', my white friend from the Tube strutted over. He touched my fist because we were 'working-class brothers'.

'Can you still write after 11 September?'

'Have you been able to write at all since 11 September?' a white British poet asked me at a party a month after the attack. 'Of course,' I replied. 'Why wouldn't I?'

For her, and for so many others, you'd think this was the first time innocents have been killed, when, of course, thousands of innocents, many of them children, are dying every day, mainly in poorer parts of the world, of malnutrition, Aids, poverty, and in natural disasters. Of course, what made the 11 September events egregious was that they came in a new kind of terrorist attack, and perhaps it's understandable that a sort of blood-link with America has been pronounced, that there's been much talk of 'our friends'. But it should also be remembered that for many of us Britons, Africans dying of Aids and Indians dying in the Gujerati earthquake, are more 'our friends'.

I grew up in Manor House/Wood Green, north London, down the road from where I live now. It was a pretty working-class area and the wider borough, Haringey, is one of the most diverse in the country. I grew up around 'native' English, Irish, Africans, Caribbeans, south Asians, Turks, Greeks, Jews, both Hasidic and reformed. The first racial incident I can recall was a bottle-throwing spat between myself, then six or seven, and one of my brothers on one side, and a couple of Turks on the other. That apart, and some name-calling in the playground, from white kids and the odd Caribbean too, there was little aggravation. One of my brother's friends was a Greek, another was tight with two Pakistani boys; we all knew a lot of different people.

Roots, routes (or how I discovered I was black)...

When I was 12, I won a fees-paid scholarship to a public school deep in the country. Again, no trouble. Indeed, you might say there was a lot of white love. If you'd asked me then what my self-conception was, I would have known, on a level, that I was black, but I had a much more acute sense of being from a Nigerian home. The home regime - the corporal punishment, educational expectations, emphasis on obedience and respect - was all, it seemed to me, to do with our being Nigerian. Which is to say that, until someone tells you different, what you feel you're living in, is a culture. And race and culture are not at all the same thing.

Race is on the outside, culture on the inside. Which is why I don't underestimate the gravity behind the thinking when a white Brit, with a sorrowful shake of the head, attempts to explain to me how my kind can never be really British: 'It's not 'cos you're black but it's just that you don't have the culture, mate. In your bones, you know.' I have a less ossified view of culture, one that sees it as not fixed in a person's or nation's history, but as a fluid, ongoing process. Routes as much as roots. The Nigerianness of our home jostled with all the other cultures out there that took our fancy. One brother, famously in our parts, became a latter-day teddy boy, another hung out at a local soul pirate station. At 15, you would have caught me in my black eyeliner-wearing Velvet Underground period; at 18 I was rucking violently to The Smiths. More recently you'll have found me in a hip-hop club, or dancing a rare groove two-step, and you'd probably assume I'm some orthodox black-Brit who has been that all along.

When I got older, armed with an Oxford law degree - not what I wanted to study, but my father insisted on law or medicine - I moved to Brixton, south London. I was pretty much your average lefty-liberal then. That didn't take long to change.

My old Haringey people played a part. I noticed how quickly many of them, after our fluid, mixy-mixy teen years, began returning to their 'home' cultures once the real adult world had started. Financial inducements and family pressure were crucial. A Greek father would say to his son: 'If you marry this Greek girl, this friend of our family, we'll sort you out with a position in the family business, and a house in Southgate.' And so my Greeks would settle down with their Greeks, Indians with their Indians. And I likewise was spending increasing time in my emergent 'home' culture - a maturing, increasingly sophisticated black-British vibe. If you were more middle-class, there were now bars and spots and people for you too, in places like Brixton. No doubt at some emotional level, after a long while in extremely white institutions, I was meeting a need.

I was sharing Brixton with a number of 'right-on' white friends and acquaintances from university, but here was the funny thing. In all my years there, we almost never found ourselves in the same social space. And though they, with their ethnic beads and accessories, and the pot they bought from the Rastaman in their pub, thought they were all part of some multicultural paradise, many knew little of what was truly going on in their communities. They weren't noticing, from their eyries in trendy Notting Hill and Brixton, how deeply young urban Britain was changing around them. How it had become increasingly black-inflected. How average white, Greek or Asian kids on the streets where they lived, were pronouncing 'ask' like 'arks', Caribbean-style, and had a ready grasp of patois. And how, in the whiter suburbs, there were others too who wanted a piece of this new action.

I was a journalist, working in liberal institutions such as the BBC. One or two funny things happened to me there, especially at lunchtime. Going out to get a sandwich on Shepherd's Bush Green, quite a black neighbourhood, I'd notice how many colleagues whom I'd been talking to minutes before, wouldn't recognise me on the street. They kept their heads down on the Green and hurried on about their business, or else, even if they seemed to see me, looked at me blankly, right through me. I began to develop a sharper understanding of white timidity, of middle-class ignorance. It seemed, still seems, that we knew so much more about you than you about us, that the Right didn't like us, and the Left didn't know us. My twenties, in short, were all about coming to terms with the limits of liberalism.

Race, or rather the disappointments around race, can breed an increasing non-alignment in, and semi-detachment from, this island's story. And just as Oxford student Chelsea Clinton has found she needs to be around Americans who share and understand her pain since the terrorist attacks, so I found an increasing need to close ranks in the light of things I saw happening to my kind.

In part, semi-detachment seemed to be what the powers-that-be had wanted for some time. In a key speech in 1966, Labour Home Secretary Roy Jenkins laid out the policy of 'cultural diversity' that has guided thinking in this country ever since. He rejected the 'flattening process of uniformity'. People should be encouraged to hang on to their 'native' cultures, within a wider integrated Britain. Since then, 'Celebrating Difference' has been all the rage. Hence the growth of black and Asian publicly-funded festivals; the 'multicultural' programming on Channel 4 and the BBC (generally broadcast after midnight); black sections in bookshops (go past the A-Z of literature, down to that dark corner, and there'll you'll find us, nestling between the sci-fi and the erotica).

Diversity, championed by both liberals and any number of progressive black people keen to find a space they could call their own, has utterly failed in bringing people in this country closer together, in disseminating knowledge. Sure, it's had its beneficial effects for many minority people, and this should not be underestimated, but it has let the wider public off the hook. The Lawrence inquiry was supposed to change all this, but much that happened in that story only confirmed our impotence. Lawrence was killed in 1993, but it took three years for the national media and the Government to take up the fight, and only then because of the happy accident of Stephen's father Neville Lawrence, painter and decorator, working on Daily Mail editor Paul Dacre's house.

So what precisely did the Lawrence inquiry change?

This moment of our 'greatest triumph' was born in an old-fashioned 'master-servant' moment. It could, and should, have happened before, but only happened when middle England was up for it. Moreover, this killing of a black boy by white lads was an old narrative, still true of course, but an old first-order assault of the type that was happening 40 years ago, just as racism in the police force is an old narrative. It didn't really speak to the subtler, second-order injuries this non-white generation more commonly feels.

More and more I could see what my father, in his insistence that I studied law, was trying to protect me from. The great thing about joining one of the old professions is that, once you've passed the exams, you're sorted. It's harder for employers not to give you jobs. This is one of the main reasons why so many Asians are doctors, and so many black working-class people go into sport. Immigrants tend to look for types of work where standards are objective.

This is part of the knowledge that non-white Britons take around with them. I have been lucky enough to travel across the world, and the story is uniformly similar, uniformly depressing. In Peru, Brazil, Australia, Europe, the United States, even in the Caribbean and black America (where 'shadism', the preference for lighter-skinned black people, is prevalent), darker-skinned people are at the bottom of the pile.

It's been like this for a long time now. There's - how would you put it - a 'situation' going on. I'd call it a war. Like the war on terror, it's not a conventional war, but it's a war nonetheless. A war to restore battered psyches, a war against white supremacy.

Forgive me if this sounds dramatic, but this is why I'm unlikely to settle down with a white girl. I don't say this lightly. I went out with a white girl for some years in my early twenties. A lovely person and, needless to say, utterly blameless in race matters. We tried hard to make it work but it proved impossible because so often for me my commitment was affected by the fact that, outside our relationship, in the wider world, I felt there was a war on, one in which I was honour-bound to play my part. Most whites and many blacks don't think there's a war on, and that's fine. Some will think there is a war on, but that their white partner, say, has nothing to do with it, and that is an eminently reasonable position too. Others are 'colour-blind', and just believe in love, and that's great, if you can do it. God knows, I have nothing against mixed-race relationships. My analysis may be wrong, and the conclusions I draw from it are debatable. Like the stubborn Japanese soldier who came out of his bunker years after the war had ended, looking for Americans to shoot, I too may one day emerge from my trench to find that the war stopped long ago. But not yet. Where we are at present, I think, can best be illustrated by that most mainstream of TV shows, EastEnders, and a black Briton who's made it to mainstream icon status, Ian Wright.

In EastEnders, the Queen Vic is the key location. Its white characters spend a great amount of time there, and its black characters go there too. But the reality is that many black people barely go to pubs; we prefer winebars or restaurants-cum-bars. So much so that, when I meet a black person who goes regularly to the pub I can assume that he's spent some formative years in a white world - perhaps in a small town somewhere, or else at one of our old, predominantly white, universities.

A different way of drinking

If the BBC was interested in portraying black London life accurately you would expect the black characters, at least occasionally, to be found in a different drinking space. The fact that they're not can only be due to the producers' liberal desire to present the East End as a happily integrated community - all races socialising together under one roof. In fact, when many black people catch the show, they think: 'This is silly, this isn't what we want. When are they gonna have their black characters doing more "black" things?'

At the turn of the Nineties, the footballer Ian Wright would often celebrate his goals by running to the corner flag, and doing a 'bogling' move - the 'bogle' was a ragamuffin reggae dance then popular in the black community. The man was clearly charismatic, and I was excited at the idea of this black Brit bringing some of the black Brit vibe to wider public attention. But the media didn't really get behind Wright in those days. He was seen as being a bit troublesome. Still, I noticed that, as the years went by, Wright, in his public pronouncements, began to sound more and more like a little Englander.

Last year he was one of those leading the chorus of indignation against the foreigner, Sven-Göran Eriksson, managing our English team. In the intervening years, of course, Wright's media career had blossomed, although now he seems less the underground black Brit and more the cheeky chappie of British music hall tradition. Does this not tell us something about the price that must still be paid to make it big in this country?

Still, perhaps I'm being too hard... Given the situation in the rest of Europe, and the de facto segregation that characterises much of the US, maybe Britain is not badly placed. It is in some sort of position to make this island the most progressive, happiest multicultural in the world, to be a new beacon, and to give itself a new, invigorated identity in the process. But we must do much more talking with each other. There must be much more knowledge, more widely spread. At present, though, in our still all-to-play-for present, race remains enough to kill, or at least madden, a man.

Diran Adebayo's first novel *Some Kind Of Black* was garlanded with awards; he also won the Writer's Guild New Writer of the Year in 1996. His latest novel is *My Once Upon A Time* (Abacus)