AFROPEAN

Notes from Black Europe

Johny Pitts

‘A revelation’
Owen Jones

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AFROPEAN

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'Elegant, honest writing . . . a vehemently unromantic modernist travelogue' Owen Hatherley, *New Statesman*, Books of the Year

'In *Afropean*, Johny Pitts has not only written a well-researched and very timely book. He's done so while cohering and curating a community of writers, thinkers and artists from within Europe's black diaspora to give voice and form to this inchoate, hybrid identity' Gary Younge

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'A fruitful and most welcome contribution' Aida Amoako, *The Times Literary Supplement*

'A humane, empathetic, urgent and truly eye-opening journey through lives and voices that are so often overlooked and unheard. Johny Pitts brings us Europe on its own terms' Owen Jones

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johny Pitts is a writer, photographer and broadcast journalist. He has received various awards for his work exploring African-European identity, including a Decibel Penguin Prize, an ENAR (European Network Against Racism) award and a Society of Authors Travelling Grant. He is the curator of the online journal Afropean.com, and has contributed words and images to the *Guardian*, the *New Statesman*, and *The New York Times*.

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To my parents, Richie and Linda,
and my siblings, Richard and Chantal

'They live in a sort of frontier zone criss-crossed by ethnic, religious and other fault lines. But by virtue of this situation – peculiar rather than privileged – they have a special role to play in forging links, eliminating misunderstandings, making some parties more reasonable and others less belligerent . . . And that is precisely why their dilemma is so significant: if they themselves cannot sustain their multiple allegiances, if they are continually pressed to take sides . . . then all of us have reason to be uneasy about the way the world is going . . .'

– Amin Maalouf, *Les Identités meurtrières*, 1998

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Introduction

When I first heard it, it encouraged me to think of myself as whole and unhyphenated: *Afropean*. Here was a space where blackness was taking part in shaping European identity at large. It suggested the possibility of living in and with more than one idea: Africa and Europe, or, by extension, the Global South and the West, without being mixed-this, half-that or black-other. That being black in Europe didn't necessarily mean being an immigrant.

Labels are invariably problematic, often provocative, but at their best they can sing something into visibility. From my stymied vantage point – growing up in a working-class area of Sheffield ravaged by the external forces of free-market economics and the internal, protective force of local insularity that took shape in postcode wars – I began to notice a world that had been invisible to me before, or at the very least implausible; in my small corner of Britain, I had felt I was being forced to react against one culture or overidentify with the other.

Originally coined in the early 90s by David Byrne and Belgian-Congolese artist Marie Daulne, front woman of music group Zap Mama, I first encountered this notion of 'Afropean' in the realms of music and fashion. Among many others, Les Nubians, soul sisters from Chad by way of France, exuded it, as did Neneh Cherry, whose roots are Swedish and Sierra Leonean, Joy Denalane from South Africa via Germany, and Claude Grunitzky's *Trace* publication. 'Transcultural Styles and Ideas' was the magazine's tagline and reflected Grunitzky's own Afropean identity: he had a Polish grandfather on his mother's side, was born in Togo, raised in Paris and launched his magazine in London. This was a very attractive

scene I was tapping into: beautiful, talented, successful black Europeans effortlessly articulating their cultural influences in coherent and creative ways. It was particularly attractive to me because the sense was that this iteration of blackness existing in Europe appeared as if it wasn't going to be going anywhere any time soon, felt closer to home than the sometimes overbearing cultural and political language emerging out of America, and more encompassing and nuanced than the Black Britain club, whose sense of itself was starting to feel outdated, often packaged exclusively as an embodiment of the Windrush Generation.*

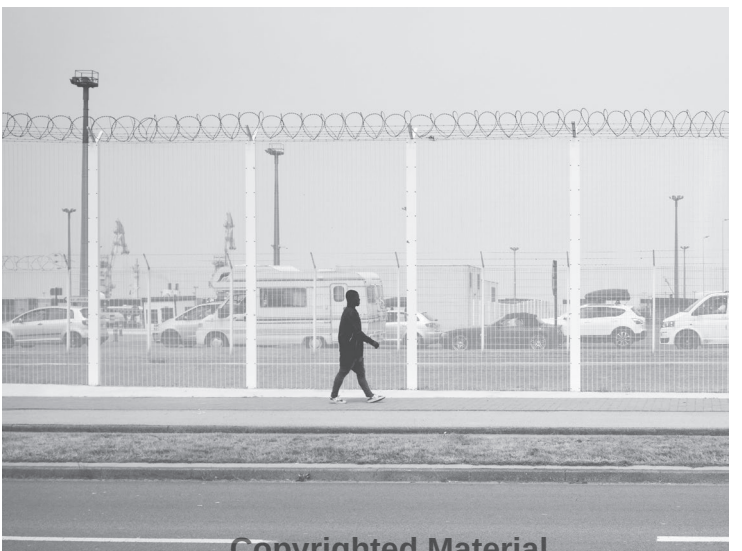
Initially, then, I saw 'Afropean' as something of a utopian alternative to the doom and gloom that has surrounded the black image in Europe in recent years and an optimistic route forward. I wanted to work on a project that connected and presented Afro-Europeans as lead actors in our own story and, with all this glorious Afropean imagery in mind, I imagined this would result in some kind of coffee-table photo-book with snippets of feel-good text to accompany a series of trendy photographic portraits. There would be images of the 'success stories' of black Europe: young men and women whose street style effortlessly and elegantly articulated an empowered black European mood.

It was a visit to the 'Jungle' in Calais in 2016 that encouraged me to reconsider this approach. Over some fragrant, milky Arabic tea, Hishem, a young man from Sudan who ran one of many small, remarkably organized cafés and had been living in the Jungle for ten months, told me how he'd lost everything, had no surviving family members, had painful memories of the past and tremulous visions of the future and was stuck in this limbo land between Africa and Europe, home (a little of which he'd miraculously fashioned in his cushion-covered café) and anonymity. As I left his creaking plywood premises, he suggested that I write about his story and about life in the Jungle, a request I was nervous about. This man was intelligent,

* In the last national census, for the first time more black Brits identified themselves as black African than Afro-Caribbean.

articulate and literate: wouldn't it be better that he write about the Jungle himself? Maybe I could help attract attention to his writing, or publish his story on the website that I run, but what did I personally know about seeing friends massacred, fleeing war, hiding for my life in shipping containers or on ill-equipped boats in order to arrive penniless at a bunch of cold, windswept shacks in the hinterlands of northern France, apart from what he was telling me?

After exchanging contact details, I left the Jungle on my bicycle and slowly realized that I was being watched and followed through the blustery streets of Calais by the French military police, the Gendarmerie. Attempting to enter the white gates of the port to catch my ferry back to the UK, I was stopped before I could even get to passport control, searched, asked for my ID, where I was going, where I'd come from, how long I'd been away, and why. Finally, after more questioning and looks of suspicion, I was allowed to enter an official compound I'd seen other brown-skinned men of my age look longingly at from a distance. I was in; they were out.



Unlike the people I met in the Jungle, I wasn't so much living in limbo as living with liminality. I was 'in' because I had ID. I had ID because I was born and raised in England, had a history connected to Europe, knew how things ran. And yet, within this piece of geography, this idea of Europe, I was frequently reminded that I wasn't all the way in; one Remembrance Day – a day I've come to dread for the way it spikes an ugly nationalism which I sometimes find myself on the receiving end of – I was hit with that old chestnut and told 'go back to where you came from' by a middle-aged man, red-faced with rage and racism. My skin colour had disguised various facts, such as my grandfather having fought for Britain behind enemy lines in the Second World War and winning a medal for doing so. My skin had disguised my Europeanness; 'European' was still being used as a synonym for 'white'.

If 'Afropean' was something that could attempt to address this issue, I needed to find out what lay behind or beyond its brand. A brand largely black-spun and authored, yes, but that's all it was for now, a pleasant idea that was being sold to me and involved PR companies, stylists, fashion photographers and art direction. In Britain, it was this sort of vision of corporate multiculturalism, this veneer of inclusion, that Tony Blair's New Labour had used in an attempt to make Britain appear international, open-minded, forward-thinking and ready for business in the global economy, without affecting policies for long-term change in the way Britain treated its immigrants. Did Afropean include only beautiful, economically successful (and often light-skinned) black people?

'Afropean' as aspiration was one thing, but as I was writing about an interplay between black and European cultures, I realized this utopian vision of a black European experience would mean wilfully ignoring realities shared by a majority of black people living in Europe. It would mean making the numerous groups of unemployed black men I saw at train stations, or the African women cleaning toilets, or the disenfranchised communities struggling in the hinterlands of cities, completely invisible. It

also seemed disingenuous to leave out my own culturally rich – if also less glamorous – experience of growing up mixed-race in Britain, and how it felt to travel Europe as somebody who identifies as black. It became apparent that I should let the reader know where I was coming from, in order that they might better understand where I was heading, that is, the under-documented areas of Europe that often contradict the homogenized monocultured depictions suggested by tourist boards and pocket-sized travel guides. I was also travelling during a time when a 'multicultural backlash' suggesting that the likes of me represented some sort of failed temporary experiment was sweeping across the continent and felt it was time to regroup and reassert my own plurality as part of a larger mission to suggest how multiculturalism might work beyond the pages of a reactionary press, in the very real multiculturalism embedded in my own heritage and in the streets of European cities. 'Afropean' had to be more than, to paraphrase Labour MP Jon Cruddas, an obsession with an authentic search for the self, and something more like a contribution to a community, with its trade-offs and compromises. It had to build a bridge over that dividing fence that says whether you're in or out and form some sort of informal cultural coalition.

I read a lot of valuable academic research and sociological theory, but all too often this was gathering dust in universities, or preaching to the converted, written or cited more often by wealthy, educated white scholars than the people being written about and couched in a stand-offish academic vernacular. Formal education is often driven by someone else's knowledge: who authorized and shaped its rhetoric? Whose knowledge is it? Who has access to it? What about black Europe beyond the desk of a theorist, found in the equivocal and untidy lived experiences of its communities? Black Europe from the street up?

I had no choice but to let a subjective light slip between the cracks and remind myself that I wasn't trying to insert this word that resonated with my experience – 'Afropean' – as some

authorized new discourse in racial politics. It seemed to me that many 'big picture' books about race were being produced at a time when day-to-day dialogue and conversation were breaking down, when interactions on social media lacked goodwill and humour, with authors and bloggers presenting themselves as infallible spokespeople. This work is an attempt to use on-the-ground travel reportage as a way to wriggle free from the pressures of theory and honestly reveal the secret pleasures and prejudices of others as well as myself, by which I mean the human self; learning to be comfortable with being black and imperfect in depictions on a page. An effort to begin with the personal in order to arrive at the universal.

So while there are encounters with movers and shakers – artists, thinkers, fashionistas, intellectuals, writers and academics – many of the stories I found are about as far away as you can get from that coffee-table sheen: those of addicts, homeless people, thieves, drug dealers and militants. But there is something else, too. Hip-hop artist Mos Def once wrote of the depiction of black culture in the media that 'we're either niggas or kings, we're either bitches or queens',[1] and in contemporary Europe it seemed to me that black people were either presented as über-stylized retro hipster dandies in thick-rimmed glasses and a bit of kente cloth, or dangerous hooded ghetto-yoot. In the middle of these high and low superlatives of blackness is perhaps the most important inclusion in this book: chance meetings with regular folk and casual encounters with shop workers, hawkers, tour operators, students, bouncers, activists, musicians, youth workers and those I simply made friends with in cafés, bars, community clubs and hostels, who all unveiled the experience of the everyday, set slightly aside from a grand narrative: beauty in black banality. As my travels weren't funded or reviewed by an academy and for the most part I didn't (couldn't) swan around Europe's swankier hotels, this style of working also suited practical considerations. The book is forged by independent black budget travel; it is an independent black working-class journey.

The view I was left with, then, was something of a sullied utopia. A place of struggle and hope, of high drama and quiet nuance, of conclusions and ambiguity, connections and disjuncture, but always there were humour and humanity in my encounters and interactions. To paraphrase Robert Frost, my quarrel with the continent is a lover's quarrel. I've travelled extensively across the planet, including in West Africa, where my blackness is rooted, and Brooklyn, that hotbed of black culture that has infinitely inspired me and where my father was born, and still, nowhere else feels quite as much like home as Europe. I was taught how to read and write here, not always the right things necessarily, but I speak its languages, engage in some of its customs. I make use of the intricate and sometimes faded beauty of its old architecture, the free museums and galleries, often in existence thanks to the blood and toil of black men and women under exploitative empires. As Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire wrote beautifully:

> *Et je me dis Bordeaux et Nantes et Liverpool et New York*
> *et San Francisco*
> *pas un bout de ce monde qui ne porte mon empreinte*
> *digitale*
> *et mon calcanéum sur le dos des gratte-ciel et ma*
> *crasse dans le scintillement des gemmes!*
>
> (I tell myself Bordeaux and Nantes and
> Liverpool and New York and San Francisco
> Not one inch of this world doesn't bear my digital imprint
> And my calcaneum on the back of skyscrapers and my squalor
> in the sparkle of gems!)[2]

As a member of Europe's black community, this Europe I speak of is all part of *my* inheritance, too, and it was time to wander and celebrate the continent like I owned it. A continent that has frequently, to quote Césaire's protégé Frantz Fanon, 'woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes [and] stories . . .'[3] A Europe that,

as I would see, was populated by Egyptian nomads, Sudanese restaurateurs, Swedish Muslims, black French militants and Belgo-Congolese painters. A continent of Cape Verdean favelas, Algerian flea markets, Surinamese shamanism, German reggae and Moorish castles. Yes, all this was part of Europe, too, and these were areas that needed to be understood and fully embraced if Europe wanted to enjoy fully functional societies. And black Europeans, too, need to understand Europe and to demand participation in its societies, to demand the right to document and disseminate our stories.

That said, there are various omissions here that are intimately linked to the black European experience, and this may frustrate some. Namely, the role of the Church in keeping black communities together. As somebody who embraces spirituality but is not religious, I decided that a separate book, written by someone more closely connected to the direct issues raised by religion, might dedicate itself solely to that theme. For similar reasons, there isn't as much about Islam as there might have been; it, too, seemed beyond the scope of this journey.

As a black northerner frustrated by what I sometimes call the Brixtonization of black Britain – that is, the reduction of the black British experience into a single, neat, London-oriented narrative – it is lamentable that, because of time and money constraints, I had to restrict my circumnavigation around the continent mostly to each country's biggest cities. For instance, there is nothing about Liverpool, Cardiff, Southampton or Bristol in the UK (Bristol is likely where my second name derives from – a Bristolian called Robert Pitts who owned plantations and slaves in the areas of South Carolina to which I can trace my black American roots) or similar areas across the continent with important, historical connections to the centuries-old black presence in Europe. Big cities are dynamic meeting places for people from all backgrounds, often have the oldest, most established black communities and suited the mood of a book tilted towards second-, third- and new-generation

black Europe which, in turn, aims to present a connective history and knowledge base for newer arrivals, such as Hishem.

Some big capital cities, particularly in Eastern and southern Europe, such as Vienna, Warsaw, Rome and Madrid, are also absent or constitute a disproportionately much smaller part of the work than I would have liked, and I'd have loved to have explored the history of the Moors of Montenegro, for instance, or delved into the former Yugoslavia's link with Africa through the non-aligned movement, which attempted to create transnational friendship among countries resistant to the hegemony of Eastern or Western powers. I have tried my best to produce a fair and even picture of contemporary life in black Europe, but I couldn't let myself be crushed under what James Baldwin called the 'burden of representation'. I can only hope that readers find virtue in a black document produced largely independently of any official organizations, bodies or academic institutions. I also encourage anybody dissatisfied with the voids I was unable to fill to

contribute to the ongoing conversations on Afropean.com, where we've so far had essays from writers with first-hand Afropean experiences growing up in places including Slovakia, the Isle of Wight, Barcelona, Geneva and Vienna, as well as from the African continent. And finally, it may be asked, 'So where is the European part in this "Afropean"?' in the same way people ask why such a thing as black history month exists in Britain but not white history month. This is like asking why London has a Chinatown but not an England Town. England and whiteness are so omnipresent they can seem invisible. White history isn't projected as white history because it is simply 'history' – it dominates TV shows and curricula and surrounds us constantly. I wrote in a European language, travelled through European streets and grappled constantly with European history, though it's true that I'm neither an anthropologist nor a historian; I'm a writer and photographer. I'm also a black citizen living in Europe, now, and this journey was an attempt to make sense of that. With my brown skin and my British passport – still a free ticket into mainland Europe at the time of writing – one cold October morning, I set out in search of the Afropeans.

Prologue: Sheffield

I was born black, working class and northern in Margaret Thatcher's Britain.

The area I grew up in was Firth Park in Sheffield, which takes its name from the industrialist Mark Firth, a major player in the steel industry during the Industrial Revolution whose family also part owned the once world-famous cutlery firm Firth Browns, where generations of my family were employed. Firth Park was developed in the 1870s to provide workers and their families with a place to live near the factories they worked in. Britain's colonies

had already been used to bolster its armed forces, and after the Second World War, with its human resources depleted and needing to rebuild itself cheaply, Britain opened its doors to colonial subjects for much-needed muscle to plug the gap in the labour market. What the postwar government in Britain didn't count on, however, was that it wouldn't be so easy to uproot these workers once they had served their purpose. The British Empire had conquered much of the world, and colonization was often justified as a means of 'civilizing' the colonized workers, or in other words 'making them British', so not only did the workers feel they had earned their right to stay, some of those first immigrants saw themselves as Brits heading home to the motherland. They'd been taught to speak, act and think English, applying themselves to learning Britain's history and geography while their own folklore, religions and wisdom, born from the landscapes or journeys of their ancestors, were dominated and demoted. When the war was over and normal life slowly resumed, the presence of black and Asian men and women was met with resistance, few bothering to really question why these new communities might be here in the first place. They were here, of course, because Britain had been over there.*

Successive British governments did not properly explain this. Those in Westminster didn't have to deal directly with these new arrivals, didn't have to work with them or foster the kind of goodwill it takes to connect with people from other cultures as neighbours; this bridge was left to the working classes to construct, or, as sometimes happened, refuse to build. More cynically, these new communities were visible scapegoats to be used at will for any societal failings – Britain's power, influence and prosperity were reduced after the Second World War but, instead of looking at the complex socio-economic factors behind this it was easier to blame high unemployment, falling educational standards and a shaken national identity on those people down the road who

* To paraphrase the Sri Lankan novelist Ambalavaner Sivanandan.

looked and spoke a little differently. Many of the older generation of black Northerners, who had to survive in smaller enclaves of otherness than their London counterparts, were, as is true of many first-generation immigrants, generally well behaved, attempting to ingratiate and integrate themselves into their new homeland.

I remember visiting an ex-girlfriend's brother, who was white, at a hairdresser's he worked at in Barnsley. I drew a few curious stares but was then able to sit quietly and wait for him to finish, largely ignored as the only black person in the shop. About half an hour later, the most famous black comedian the North has ever produced, the late Charlie Williams, walked in, spotted me straight away, pointed and, drawing attention to me in a loud voice said, 'Look, it's my cousin!', and everybody burst out laughing. He was offered a chocolate out of an open box on a coffee table and said, 'Go on, then, I will have one, it keeps my colour up.' He was using humour as an apology for our visible difference, feeling he needed to address the elephant in the room before anyone else had a chance to, effectively saying something similar to the South Asian character in Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*: 'I can't help being a Paki.'

I never felt the need to apologize for my presence. The multicultural make-up of Firth Park where I grew up comprised not only a white working-class community but established Yemeni, Jamaican, Pakistani and Indian communities, and later, more recent economic migrants and political refugees from Syria, Albania, Kosovo and Somalia. My childhood bedroom has, over the years, been like a VIP box for street opera. From it I've watched everything from Diwali and Eid celebrations to reggae parties, joy-riders, gangland shootings, rap battles, Yemeni weddings and, every so often, Prince Naseem Hamed's red Ferrari parking up next door (our neighbour Mohammed was a relative). It was no multicultural 'utopia' in the conventional sense, but it was alive and convivial, entrepreneurial and dynamic, built upon the tolerant atmosphere that comes with sharing a space daily with other people with diverse beliefs and

cultures. I was proud to be from Firth Park because many of the neighbouring and more homogeneously white areas of lower socio-economic status that surrounded us were post-industrial carcasses, harbouring boredom, depression, paranoia and demoralization. Firth Park was anything but boring. It was rough, but it was full of culture and community spirit.*

My neighbour Mohammed was more older brother to me than neighbour and was part of a larger network of people who looked out for each other. His family would feed me, take me on excursions across the country and have my back if I ever had trouble with any of the rough families in the area. I looked up to Mohammed because he rarely lost his cool and was smart, charming and respected in the community. In his younger days he was not only a skilful footballer and a bit of a ladykiller but, most impressively, the local *Street Fighter* 2 champion, the lone arcade machine to be found in Kenya Fried Chicken. Mohammed was Yemeni but culturally took part in that great ideological construct of 'blackness' that had been laid down in the 70s and 80s and bore fruit in the 90s through hip-hop culture. It was Mo who introduced me to hip-hop and everything that came with it, playing me pirated VHS recordings of *Wild Style*, *The Exorcist*, *Scarface* and Chinese kung fu B-movies (the source material every hip-hop album seemed to reference at that time), and taught me to repeat some of the swear words in those movies in

* Whenever I return to Sheffield, I notice the shifting demographics of Page Hall, an area neighbouring Firth Park, and my own tolerance of multiculturalism is put to the test. An area once home to those Pakistani, Yemeni and Jamaican communities I know well now comprises mostly of a group I'm not as culturally familiar with: Slovakian Romas. The streets are littered, men stand on street corners in groups, children run around barefoot and are sometimes filthy and broken-down cars line the streets. But I'm not at all offended by this, and I'm puzzled when white working-class Sheffielders are. The scene completely mirrors white working-class life in the 50s – the photographs I take of the area now aren't at all dissimilar to the black-and-white images you see of the area back then. 'We were dirt poor but we had a community, everybody knew each other and would help each other out – not like now,' you hear pensioners lament. Yet it is the very life that is currently being lived by the Romas that those pensioners respond to with disgust: a living, breathing working-class culture.

Arabic. *Aneek umak ana!* He also taught me how to play chess and shared with me the joys of Arabic cuisine; I was eating kohbs, lahme and aseed when I would have otherwise been living on a diet of Findus crispy pancakes, Mars bars and takeaway chips.

What impressed me most about Mo was the way he stayed true to his Arabic roots but also integrated with the white, working-class community, and without becoming a Charlie Williams-style clown. Many other second-generation ethnic minorities in the area gained the respect of white people through brute force: it wasn't given to them, so they took it, and became feared. But Mo found a happy medium, survived without losing his integrity, celebrated his Yemeni heritage by somehow making it relevant – attractive, even – to white people and expertly commingling multiple cultures into one he could work with. In this, he was much like Prince Naseem, who after a fight would speak in a mixture of Jamaican patois, African-American ebonics and strong working-class Sheffield dialect before praising Allah for his win, as if all these things sitting side by side was the most natural thing. And of course it was. Charlie Williams was something of an anomaly on the streets of Yorkshire in the 40s; Naseem Hamed in the 90s was not.

Compared to some of the white 'trouble families' (as my mother called them), Mohammed's family were a positive influence on me in terms of community solidarity, cultured conversation and emphasis on spirituality and education. There was a jovial, street-culture façade to our interactions, but his home and customs were encoded with knowledge, education and art and added to the collective wisdom in my upbringing when school was failing me. Islam is, after all, a deeply scholarly religion.

The Yemeni and Jamaican communities had managed, somehow, to steal some of Britain back and mould it in their own image by creating art, culture, intellectual thought and, in the end, a life, despite the worst odds. It was the type of living, breathing, street-level multiculturalism that has been exploited, appropriated or studied then either superficially transfigured or cruelly demonized

by politicians, academics and theorists from a distorting distance. Tony Blair's New Labour was a step up from Margaret Thatcher, to be sure, but too often in ways that were only symbolic. This local community, however, while miraculously conjuring something akin to an authentic and enriching lifestyle – the very thing it was being denied systematically – could only sustain itself for so long without becoming undone by the external pressures of race, class and geography. That's why I was compelled to search for an energy beyond the love of the local and the aloof distance of the national and global. A liminal, translocal energy that ultimately provided communion with a wider black European diaspora which, over the years, has helped me maintain my balance and transcend the less empowering dynamics of my upbringing. I'd seen how many of my peers ended up suffering from a kind of participation fatigue and how the magic that had appeared under such pressure became strained without additional sustenance.

There was a brutal reminder of this shortly before I set out on my journey around Europe, when I was back living at my mom's temporarily after packing it all in in London. I was woken up by the words: 'I could have got you locked up nuff times, but I didn't. And it's not just 'cause I'm on crack, dickhead.' It was Tina, a Jamaican woman who lived three doors away on our terrace row. I reached for my phone and checked the time – 7.15 – then peeked through the blinds to look at Horninglow Road, a view I know better than any other. The window was coated with morning frost and through it the terraced houses looked almost quaint in a colourway of dawn teal and street-lamp gold. Tina was arguing with a younger girl in her early twenties, a member of a notorious white family, and their fighting continued.

'You lickal pussy 'ole, who do you think you are?' shouted Tina, who was holding a big stick in her hand.

'Tina, you mong, you better gi' me mi bag back, kasme!' snarled the white girl in a harsh Sheffield street slang, a strangely satisfying melange of working-class northern dialect, Jamaican patois, Urdu,

among other things. As well as the big stick, Tina was holding a cheap-looking brown imitation-leather bag under her arm. There was a scuffle as the white girl reached for it and Tina swung the stick wildly, missing the girl's face by centimetres. The girl retreated for a moment, but she kept shouting aggressively. Tina goaded her on.

'Come den, you pussy claat!'

The other girl turned and ran away. Then, after a moment's silence, her shrill voice pierced the morning calm again.

'Who's bad nah, then? Who's a bad gyal nah?' She emerged from a nearby garden with a house brick and headed back towards Tina.

'Gimme mi bag back nah or I'll smash this in your fuckin' face,' said the girl.

'Come den, lickal gyal. I fuckin' dare ya, DO IT,' said Tina.

Tina staggered over and punched the girl in the face. A scuffle followed and fists flew. In the skirmish the stick was dropped, Tina somehow ended up with the brick and the white girl with her bag. Then, as if a switch had been thrown, Tina relented. She dropped the brick and walked back into her house without saying a thing. But the young girl kept ranting.

'Watch nah, you pussy! You punched me straight int' face and I din't even feel owt. I'ma come back and bang ya, truss! You fuckin' pussy 'ole! Watch nah! I don't care who you know, I'm bringing man to fuck you up!'

She said this while following Tina to her door, albeit at a safe distance. And then, when it was closed, her hair all ruffled and her face flustered and red, she walked past my house, seeing Mohammed leaning out of the window next door. In a soft, warm voice, she said, 'Sorry about that, Mo'ammid, love, din't mean to wake you up, darlin. She tried teefing mi bag, din't she?' and then stumbled off down the road.

Tina hadn't always been such a mess. I remember when she was young and well turned out and would tease me about my large, unruly Afro, begging me to let her braid it into neat cane-rows. She

still asks when she sees me, but now it's her hair, nappy and knotty, needing the attention she offers to mine. The bright-eyed and witty woman I once knew was now a crackhead who'd turned her terrace house into a crack den which armed police regularly raided and where gunshots were frequently heard. Her slow deterioration into dependency was a reminder why it was so important for me to leave this place. There were lots of reminders, in fact: Firth Park was full of Tinas. People I'd grown up with had become predictable statistics and, for a while, each time I visited home a childhood friend was on the front page of the *Sheffield Star*. One murdered a three-year-old child; another lad down the road was stabbed to death; a former football teammate was sent down for twenty-two years for attempted murder, his own father having been murdered in the local park only a few years earlier . . . And I keep hearing of various schoolfriends who have ended up in mental institutions, the trauma and pressure of maintaining themselves as black people on the straight and narrow in a pathologically racist country becoming too much for them. I knew them as kids who liked to play with Transformers or kick a ball in the park. We'd have games of chess in my mom's kitchen or water fights on the road. At around sixteen or seventeen, our lives started to head in different directions. I went to college then got a part-time job as a youth worker, while many of my friends gradually fell by the wayside.

The only discernible difference between us was that my parents had created a fairly stable home – my mom had the support of her white working-class family; my dad, an African-American actor and singer, commanded some respect as an entertainer. Through my dad we got to travel, not out of necessity but for pleasure, because my mom and I visited various places across the country and sometimes abroad to see him acting in a play or a musical.

I'd been given frequent flashes, beyond what I'd seen through a screen, of a world that was so much bigger than Firth Park, so my parameters of success weren't based upon its micropolitics. Like when the so-called 'postcode wars' gripped Sheffield and 'my' area

of S5 was at war with nearby S3 and a spate of violent attacks and murders ensued.

Alain de Botton might be a strange person to reference at this point, but he eloquently explored what was happening to those around me in *Status Anxiety* (2004):

> Those without status remain unseen, they are treated brusquely, their complexities are trampled upon and their identities ignored . . . the penalty . . . lies . . . in the challenge that low status poses to a sense of self-respect. Discomfort can be endured without complaint for long periods when it is unaccompanied by humiliation; as shown by the example of soldiers and explorers who have willingly endured privations that far exceeded those of the poorest in their societies, and yet who were sustained through their hardships by an awareness of the esteem they were held in by others.[1]

That was it. I grew up seeing that age is not kind to the bad-boy: in adolescence, an ASBO was almost like having a GCSE in street credentials, and we were all enticed by the attractive mix of danger and excitement that had been connected to young black identity in popular culture. Though his story was so much deeper than this, I know I wasn't the only one who wasted daydream space on visions of being shot like Tupac Shakur. But what happens when adulthood arrives and you're a thirty-year-old who is losing your sixpack, can't read or write and has been diagnosed by behavioural therapists and prison psychologists as a sociopath? What happens when the ghetto glamour is gone?

It's too far to walk to the town centre from Firth Park, really, but I always do, because what I think of as the disparate fragments of my culture lurk in the crevices of the journey. Pleased with my moderately sized backpack, filled with enough clothes and essentials for five months in Europe, I made my way up towards Meadowhall shopping centre, through the 'Flower Estate', where

you'll find drug-dealers and joy-riders populating Honeysuckle Road, Sunflower Grove, Lavender Way, Clover Gardens and Primrose Avenue. Sheffield is like that. The prettiest names denote the roughest places. Chaucer School – on Wordsworth Avenue – is one of the worst in the city, and the average lad you'll find in Southey Green has little inclination towards romantic verse. So far was Robert Southey from our reality, growing up, I had no idea that the green was named after a poet until well into adolescence, and that it should be pronounced 'Suthie'; the area is mispronounced locally as 'Southee'.

Firth Park leads on to Wincobank, said to be the site of an Iron Age hill fort dating back to 500BCE, but you would be hard pressed to find any trace of it. Just terrace houses and an off licence with a bright yellow façade that looks home-made. My route from Firth Park to the city centre also leads past the largest listed building in Europe, which makes it sound more grandiose than it is: the building in question is the brutalist Park Hill Flats, which, until being gentrified and privatized, loomed over the city like a monolithic monster and coated everything beneath it in a thick layer of shadow. But Park Hill is an apt landmark: Sheffielders love to hate their city, getting nostalgic when the eyesores they've been complaining about for years are demolished and being offended when anyone from outside the city holds the same Sheffield-equals-shithole view as they do.

This begrudging, surreptitious pride Sheffielders have in their dishevelled urban landscape is rooted in what I believe to be a subconscious acknowledgement of what it offers: a down-to-earth, off-the-grid sense of freedom. Just under 500 kilometres from Westminster, the fading postwar buildings embody a sociable, working-class atmosphere that existed before Primark and Starbucks colonized the high streets, when unions were empowered and working-class culture hadn't been reduced to Kim Kardashian curves and *Love Island* abs. The plans for the city drawn up in the 50s by Sheffield council's city architect John B. Womersley were bold

and socialist in mood.* Over time, I have witnessed the destruction not only of civic working-class spaces and geographies but of the very idea of the civic within the minds of the working-class community; aspirations of private comfort have replaced community spirit and intellectual engagement with ideas that go beyond capitalist convenience. Communities once connected by local industries and imbued with a sense of pride and craftsmanship have been displaced by anonymous environments of globalization – you can't build much of a culture around call centres and shopping malls. I'm speaking here of the working-class north of Sheffield where I was born and raised, which sits adrift from the leafy enclaves of university professors, students and artists who have come up through the more prosperous, middle-class south of the city.

As Margaret Thatcher opened Britain up to free trade in the 80s, effectively crushing the industrial foundations of the north of England, the socioeconomic conditions and urban landscapes of my part of Sheffield were strikingly similar to those of New York in the 70s. This, combined with the bootleg copies of the seminal 1983 hip-hop-culture documentary *Wild Style* that were floating about, turned much of the city into Europe's premier playground for graffiti artists and music-makers. Council estates became concrete canvases and the tops of tower blocks broadcast pirate-radio stations. This was the flip side to all the death and violence I experienced growing up: the growth of one of the most important cultural movements of the late-twentieth century – hip-hop, a movement capable of both waylaying and exacerbating our problems.

Sheffield's reputation as a safe haven for graffiti artists came to an abrupt end in the mid-90s when a twenty-two-year-old whose tags seemed to cover every square inch of the city was caught and sentenced to five years in prison. Simon Sunderland aka Fista (his tag came from a misspelling of 'first' when he attempted his initial piece of graffiti) was inspired by hip-hop culture, but it wasn't long

* In 'Ten Years of Housing in Sheffield' (1961) the descriptions of all the projects are in three languages: English, French and Russian.

before tagging for tagging's sake became an addiction. His work often straddled the fine line between street art and what many saw as pure vandalism; his motivation was somewhere between political protest and adrenal necessity.

'It's a blind society,' he said in an interview shortly before he was caught and imprisoned. 'Every day, everywhere we go, we're bombarded with these big adverts, making money, selling lies . . . The advertisers try to vandalize our minds with images of a materialistic society.' Every so often, a beautiful, full-colour block-lettered Fista 'piece' or 'production' would appear – the type of graffiti that brightens up drab urban landscapes – but what most people remember him for was his 'bombing': quick, economical scrawls of his tag on buses and bus shelters, train tunnels, rolling stock, motorway bridges, factories and anything else he could gain access to. What set him apart from other taggers of the time was that he specifically targeted conspicuous surfaces of the city, so his name embedded its way into your subconscious the way any form of major advertising does. He became a local celebrity who shunned celebrity, a well-known brand that wasn't trying to sell you anything and a mysterious presence that had everybody gossiping. Schoolkids would say Fista was their brother, or cousin, or even claim to be Fista themselves.

The year he was put away, 1996, a whole host of subversive traditions in the West were lost to what, at the time, many thought of as progressive politics and innovations. Social-media seedlings were sprouting up online, there was an economic boom and Tony Blair was about to be elected Prime Minister. In the United States a Telecoms act consolidated radio ownership to a handful of major players, splintering hip-hop into mainstream and underground factions (killing it, basically). Post-war high-rises were being demolished all over Britain and America; Harry Handelsman's Manhattan Loft Corporation set off a wave of East London gentrification; Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York, changed New York's social landscape for ever; and Tupac Shakur was murdered,

which signalled the end of Death Row Records, perhaps the closest thing the 90s had to the Black Panther Party.*

During this period, Sheffield city centre became a more controlled and corporate environment and people like Fista didn't fit the plan so the government ploughed money into a crack anti-vandalism unit called Grime Busters whose mission was to rid the city of all graffiti, past and present. Instead of trying to nurture the little bit of creative energy that had somehow managed to grow out of the poverty and high unemployment of a post-industrial working class, they vilified its leaders. While the late Jean-Michel Basquiat – who started out as a graffiti artist tagging SAMO in New York City, in a style comparable to Simon Sunderland – was selling paintings for half a million pounds,† Fista was locked up in a grim prison in the north of England as the government erased all traces of his work.

One of the Grime Busters was recorded on local television saying, 'Imagine you left your car in the drive, woke up the next morning and someone had drawn a big eagle on it, and people said, "That's a nice eagle." That's not the point, though, is it? It's your property, and you didn't want it there so it shouldn't be there, should

* Tupac Shakur's mother, Afeni, was one of the Panther 21, and was pregnant with Tupac while she was serving time. His godmother, Assata, is still in exile in Cuba because of her activities on behalf of the party, and his godfather, Geronimo Pratt, was a high-ranking senior member – Tupac was, essentially, raised by the Black Panthers. In the 80s Huey Newton was haphazardly attempting to galvanize the criminal underground as a way to take back control of the streets under Ronald Reagan's government, and in many ways Tupac and Suge Knight had similar ideas. At Death Row Records there were corporate CEOs, Bloods and Crips and community workers mixing with an unprecedented group of talent – Dr Dre, Snoop Dogg, Nate Dogg, DeVante Swing and Tupac all in the same building. The goal, it is said, was to turn record-buyers into voters. There is an astonishingly vivid portrait of life at Death Row Records in 'How to Survive Puberty at Twenty-five' by Nina Bhadreshwar, who was born and raised in Barnsley and set up a graffiti magazine in Sheffield with Fista before moving to South Central to work for Death Row Records.

† Now worth easily quadruple that amount. At the time of writing a painting by the artist that was previously owned by David Bowie is up for auction with an estimate of £3.5 million.

it?' But I wonder what the homeowners living on, say, Rutland Road, make of that enormous, gaudy Virgin Media ad outside their house? Did anybody ask them for their permission? How do you go about getting your signs and symbols or adverts officially recognized? Nobody I grew up with knew, except that it involved an amount of money none of us could reasonably hope ever to attain.

For a while it was a game of cat and mouse between the Grime Busters and the graffiti artists. Sheffield taggers made the national press and became either *Daily Mail* villains or underground anti-heroes. Mist1, Crome, Des, SB2 and others joined Fista in the pantheon of the Sheffield graffiti scene to become household names, even if only for fifteen minutes. Graff Cats, like B-Boys and emcees, got old, had families to support and found it hard to sustain a culture that had to be lived, not just toyed with. New anti-graffiti paint was used to cover the walls of the city centre and the Grime Busters' diligence eventually paid off: any graffiti that wasn't immediately rubbed away by their powered jets of water faded over time and wasn't replaced – the speed at which the tags were being destroyed made it pointless. This, along with a general decline in hip-hop as a culture, rather than just a music genre, in younger generations across the West and the threat of serious jail time all but spelled the end of a once-legendary scene.

I choose 'Afropean' as a potentially progressive self-identifier (rather than 'European') because there is something about the nature of Europe that destroys by assimilation, something I learned first hand when I moved to London and became immersed in a UK hip-hop scene run behind the scenes by white private-school kids who turned their noses up at UK grime for not being 'real' – unlike their complex, privately funded lyricism over old-skool beats made out of expensive vintage-vinyl collections.

Every time I return to Sheffield I search the streets, hoping to find a Fista tag, a ghost-trace of the raw, pre-digital Sheffield I remember from childhood. His heavy sentence was intended to send a message out to the rest of the graffiti community, and his

tags were more specifically targeted by the Grime Busters than anyone else's. When I eventually found one on a bridge near the abandoned Brightside railway station, the defiant white lettering looked tired and skeletal and, more than anything, defeated. The system had won. Nowadays, graffiti, much like other elements of hip-hop, has been toned down, neutered and commodified. It is commissioned by people who want Banksy-style stencils on the walls of cultural-industry quarters. You're as likely to see it included in those advertising billboards Fista deplored as sprayed on the walls nearby. Except, this time, it is legal, corporate vandalism.

My nostalgia for Fista's graffiti is rooted in its association with the steel city's fringe communities. Like the graff, there was something ephemeral about the black community in Sheffield. It was never as solid or as sure of itself as London's, and everything connected with it was underground and clandestine. A friend of a friend would let you in and tell you about the illegal Jamaican blues parties that Docker or Donkeyman was throwing, or the dial for SCR, the pirate-radio station broadcasting out of various Sheffield high-rises which played all the garage, ragga, RnB and hip-hop that was so hard to get hold of before the internet. One of the first major black festivals was a DIY Caribbean street affair in Pitsmoor called Summer Jam, which eventually grew into Music in the Sun, held in Don Valley Bowl – one of the few occasions when all Sheffield's black community would congregate in a single place each year. Though there were a few important long-standing organizations, such as the Non-Stop Foundation, there was a sense that the most successful displays of multicultural Sheffield had sprouted up out of the community organically.

All those organizations are now defunct, but even in their heyday they struck me as vulnerable and temporary; as soon as the council tried to control them, you knew it spelled death. When the system got involved, put on curfews, vetted the music, sanctioned and colonized the space with corporate sponsors, that sense of pending alienation crept back in. Somebody would be put in charge who

wasn't from the community, or at the very least had to answer to somebody who came from outside. As I walk around these stale spaces today, once home to a lost, uncommemorated history, sometimes I like to imagine something similar to the English Heritage blue plaques that honour the former residences of famous and distinguished scholars, artists and explorers. I'd choose to commemorate 'Mr Menace, Sheffield's best emcee' on a row of terrace houses or tell passers-by that 'SCR, Sheffield's pioneering pirate-radio station, was broadcast here' on the low-rise student accommodation where a now-demolished council estate once stood.

Black culture in Sheffield, for me at least, wasn't solely synonymous with black people. My route into the community came not through my father (who, being a 'glamorous' African-American singer, wasn't as much a part of the black British experience), but through a white friend, Leon Hackett, who grew up in Pitsmoor. Living in an area where the majority of residents were from Jamaica, Leon very quickly had to learn all about Jamaican culture to survive, and in many ways identified more with it than with white working-class Sheffield. Part of a large family, he and his brothers spoke perfect patois and a lot of them became emcees and DJs on the scene. Along with Mohammed, it was Leon who first introduced me to hip-hop, which at the time still felt like an underground club that wasn't so easy to be inducted into. We'd freestyle for hours over instrumentals and go through the painstaking process of making mixtapes by recording J Rugged and MC Nige's shows on SCR, using the stop and start buttons on our cassette players.

Leon was another reason I wanted to see the rest of Europe through the eyes of black culture. How else had it influenced and permeated its way into the consciousness of the continent's white population? How much of this reverse colonization could I find? African art had influenced cubism and art deco in France; Jamaicans had created a huge reggae scene and an identification with Rastafarianism in Germany; Stuart Hall had radically altered the way culture was studied in the UK at university level – what