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of America, and more encompassing and nuanced than the Black Britain club, whose sense of itself was starting to feel outdated, often packaged exclusively as an embodiment of the Windrush Generation.*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