

## **The Identity Parade**

Johny Pitts

In a milieu of modest aspirations, I'd found the dream job. It seemed to emerge from the same 1990s working-class wonderland as the invitation to my Mum to participate in market research, where she'd spend an evening with her friends trying out new chocolate bars or face creams, to fill out a questionnaire and receive £50.

Between the ages of fourteen and eighteen my side-hustle involved spending one day every other week or so at the West Bar police station in Sheffield, lining up for an identity parade when somebody else deemed 'black other', or 'mixed-race' was suspected of committing a crime. A bunch of maybe 30 young men with light brown skin would converge in a small, clinical room to be inspected by an officer and get whittled down to 20, those sent home receiving a £10 'show fee'. For us lucky few chosen to stay on, an extra £5 an hour would be given, and then we'd be sent in to get scrutinised by the actual suspect, who would choose which ten of us he felt most resembled his image for the final line-up.

Surrounded by our peers, the only emotion we showed during these ID parades was macho bravado, but the process involved could sometimes be hair-raising. I remember one young man in particular – maybe a year older than I was, still a teenager – who was suspected of multiple gangland murders. He wandered along the line staring each of us in the eye, nose to nose, with a menacing look that, just like ours, must have masked an inner terror; he was facing life behind bars at that young age. It is terrifying to think that if he was found guilty back then, twenty years ago, he might still be essentially where I left him – in prison, during which time I've met my

lifelong partner, had a child, travelled the world, written a couple of books and moved to Marseille... *had a life* and the chance to reconfigure how I identify myself as a man and somebody with brown skin.

Other than the tense line-up selection, and the deeply unsettling experience of sometimes being misidentified as the perpetrator of the crime (we were assured by police that we had total immunity), these events were something that at the time I would have described as fun, maybe even funny. It was a convivial space with a strange power dynamic; while we all chatted among ourselves, we were at best standoffish with the officers, at worst exceptionally rude to them, almost encouraged to relish this rare, safe, familiar proximity to law enforcement we didn't have out on the streets.

Officers were always middle-aged white men, and whatever we threw their way, they remained chipper – in that patronising way people with all the real power can be – and bent over backwards to make us feel comfortable. And as well they might. I had no idea at the time that shortly before this new casual employment of mine, South Yorkshire Police had made the national press for 'blacking up' the faces of eight white men to appear in an identity parade with a black suspect, a fact which resulted in the case being thrown out of court because of unfair process. Police at the time claimed they couldn't get enough people together who resembled the suspect – they obviously found it easier to find black criminals than law-abiding members of the black community.

I was part of a weird sort of outreach scheme, then; the police connecting with us in order to help the process of imprisoning people who looked like us. Yet they also connected us with *each other*, and in those days, a kind of fleeting community was cultivated around this notion of 'mixed-race' as constructed by the police. We'd never talk of it, or express it in any way that would hint at a special bond, but in a way the beauty of the connection lay in the lack of expression. There, in some random room in a police building, we

had what might now be called a 'safe space' for a group of people on the front line of managing multiple cultures, where – beyond the usual teenage posturing – we didn't have to perform a racialised identity (I remember lying to black friends about getting 'beats' from my parents, because they would always talk about it with such pride, as though it made them tougher and wiser). And yet, in the police station, our mixed-raceness itself turned into a performance. Our identity was literally a parade.

I often brag that if I don't know someone who is mixed-race, from Sheffield, and in their thirties, then I definitely know someone who knows them, and my confidence stems from those years hunched up with so many other mixed-race kids in the West Bar police station. But in this era of spurious social media platforms, I look back and think: if these ID parades acquainted me with an entire generation of mixed-race Sheffields, then they obviously did the same for the police – giving them names, siblings, addresses and perhaps even valuable clues about what was happening in our communities. In the way my Mum's market research gig drew out private information, cultural trends and demographic tendencies from her and her friends in order to empower a large powerful system at play, so too did these ID parades give the South Yorkshire Police intimate access to young mixed-race men. Like the 'safe spaces' we see with WhatsApp groups, they also cordoned us off into a monolithic cultural entity.

Over the three or four years I did the parades, an odd thing began to occur: faces from our pool of paid volunteers started appearing as the actual suspects. Lads we'd walked in with only a couple of weeks earlier now greeting us from the other side of the fence, totally humiliated in front of their own community, with the crimes they'd been accused of laid bare (a police officer would read out the allegation from behind the one-way mirror to sniggers from us volunteers). Adolescence is a rocky road for everyone, but during that hormonal battleground marked by the ID parade years, I saw

so many of these kids go by the wayside, end up dead or in jail. Very often the only brown faces I'd ever see on the front page of the local *Sheffield Star* newspaper were accompanied by headlines like 'Monster' and 'Sicko'.

This experience partly played into my decision to train as a youth worker. I ended up getting a job with a mentorship scheme set up by Sheffield City Council called the Multiple Heritage Service, the first of its kind in Europe and a totally New Labour type of project, one that looked great on paper but was flimsy in practice, and attempted to institutionalise the messy lived experience of people of 'multiple heritage'. On the one hand, the development of the service appeared to suggest Britain's multicultural reality was finally being recognized; on the other, the service defined itself by highlighting how multiculturalism was failing, drawing upon small-scale empirical research that drew basic conclusions from complicated issues. 'Mixed-race people', we were told, were under-achieving at school, suffered disproportionately from social exclusion, were the fastest growing group of young offenders, up to eight times more likely than children in white, Afro-Caribbean or Asian families to enter care, and had a higher likelihood of family breakdown. The problem with this research is that it overwhelmingly used the terms 'multiple heritage' or 'mixed-race' to describe people with a black and a white parent. When academic underachievement was mentioned, it didn't refer to kids who had a Scottish mum and an Irish father, or a Danish dad and a Japanese mother.

To be clear, some of these issues were real for the mixed-race community – I suffered from a couple of them personally – but weren't presented as part of a larger problem endemic to British society at large. This problem had multiple facets – racism, both casual and institutional, the failure of schools to teach the impacts of colonialism properly, and the lack of resources and

amenities in working-class neighbourhoods, which were often also the most multicultural because of the communities who came to Britain to help rebuild the country after World War II. Yemenis, Jamaicans and Pakistanis were in Britain partly to fill the post-war shortage of cheap labour.

In 2001, for the first time, the UK national census included a box where a person could identify themselves as being of a 'mixed' ethnicity. Less than a year later, however, in 2002 (the year the Multiple Heritage Service was set up), David Blunkett, then Home Secretary and MP for Sheffield Brightside, the constituency in which I was born and raised, went on record as saying British schools were being 'swamped' by asylum seekers. This was one of many occasions in which the New Labour government co-opted and even championed multiculturalism, while they undermined it on the other.

For my part, I entered schools as a youth worker charged with the goal of 'raising self-esteem'. This involved delivering bland facts about historical figures from Jamaica, Ghana, or the United States. It was supposed to serve as a corrective to the National Curriculum in which 'blackness' was largely absent, but all it did was induce the same vacant stares I remember seeing and giving when I'd been at school. Any blackness in academia was presented as over there and back then, detached from the world in front of us.

In the end we would spend the sessions talking about football or hip-hop, which sometimes morphed into freestyle sessions, which might, on a good day, then tenuously lead us to Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah or Martin Luther King – invoking the reason Talib Kweli once rapped, 'I speak at schools a lot 'cause they say I'm intelligent; *no*, it's cause I'm dope, if I was wack I'd be irrelevant'.

Sometimes, using this more relaxed method, I would break down barriers with the kids I mentored, but unlike my teenage years doing the ID parades, I began to feel uneasy about getting a pay cheque for work that I ultimately felt was most often inane and ineffective. The staff at the Sheffield Multiple Heritage Service were well-meaning, but totally indoctrinated into the managerial spiel of New Labour. Instead of helping out in the community they were knee-deep in bureaucracy; ‘investing in people’ rather than nurturing talent, and filling out forms for subsidies in the ‘cultural industries’.

‘There’s no one so easy to rob of their culture as those that don’t know that they’ve got one’, once said the Liverpoolian sculptor Arthur Dooley, and I realised that the reductive realm of officialdom I’d experienced seemed to have a way of crushing everything it supposedly championed. The commodification of Multiculturalism meant that while diversity – and especially the image of mixed-race people – could be seen on billboards for brands like H&M and United Colors of Benetton in the noughties, or attached to globalisation and found in elite ‘non-places’ (Marc Augé’s term for corporate, internationally-neutral spaces such as hotel lobbies, airport lounges, and boardrooms where commerce suiting a global elite took place), it was detached from working-class streets that often lived a multicultural reality. This is an issue now more than ever, as communities are grouped into demographic silos by social media companies, who enforce convenient though reductive identities through algorithms and advertising.

For me, terms like multiple heritage and mixed-race (or Afropean, a term I use as a connective portal into a wider lived experience in the wake of European colonialism) – if we are to continue to use them – need to be reimagined in the realms of the everyday again, not in the institutions

where one could so often find them in the nineties and noughties. I look at the landscape of my childhood and see that spaces where mixedness so often took place: drum and bass raves, high-rise estates that served as broadcasting towers for pirate radio stations and as canvases for a legendary graffiti scene, barbershops, illegal blues parties and spontaneous get-togethers (the type that resulted in a legendary street carnival in the Caribbean area of Pitsmoor) were vanquished by Sheffield City Council and then replaced with sanitised versions. Instead of messy, organic places of social encounter (the type that allowed movements such as the 1920s' Harlem Renaissance to thrive), this new type of multiculturalism and its politics of space had goals driven by corporate or governmental subsidies and reduced to the type of forced expressions of togetherness that spelled its death. If the mixed-race experience can mean anything, it can't be policed, put in a room or on a billboard. It needs to be fluid and borderless, a practical, lived entry into a shifting and blurry experience that reminds us that those things are exactly what it is to be human. Whatever your roots. Whatever your routes.

## **Johny Pitts**

Johny Pitts is the curator of the ENAR (European Network Against Racism) award-winning online journal *Afropean.com* and the author of *Afropean: Notes From Black Europe* (Penguin Random House). Translated into French, German, Italian, and Spanish, it won the 2020 Jhalak Prize and the 2020 Bread & Roses Award for Radical Publishing, and is the recipient of the 2021 Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding.

Johny has presented on MTV, BBC, and ITV1, and his broadcasting includes a BBC Radio 4 documentary exploring Black identity through the music of his father who was a member of the Northern Soul group The Fantastics. He currently presents 'Open Book' for BBC Radio 4 and a forthcoming Afropean podcast funded by a grant from the National Geographic Society.

Johny has contributed words and images for *The Guardian*, *The New Statesman*, *The New York Times*, and *CondéNast Traveller*. His debut photographic exhibition *Afropean: Travels in Black Europe* was at Foam in Amsterdam in 2020.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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