

Rasta in Queens Park

Edson Burton

'For the Conquering Lion/ Shall break every chain
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As the turbaned dread led us in song, I felt myself floating away. The herb, the red, gold and green flag, the respectful addresses of the sisters and brothers dressed in military fatigues and ankle-length skirts: here were my people, my Black people, here in a community hall in Birmingham. I rolled that revelation into a ball, swallowed it and sat as it dissolved into my arteries on the minibus. It would keep me safe back home.

Back home: Queens Park, the 'ghetto' area of shire town Bedford, where the waifs and strays of Empire and Europe came to forfeit their dreams in the factories and brickworks. Queens Park: rows of red brick terraced housing punctuated by delis, corner shops, mosques, gurdwaras. Queens Park: a sensual confluence not to be found anywhere else in the town – perhaps not anywhere else in the world.

While our parents found their migrant dreams slammed against the factory walls, we shifted between reality and Americana hallucinations. We were Godfathers, Bronx warriors, Rocky, Rambo. And then one day someone named it: we dreamt of being White. Not white in the sense of the mysterious kids we saw in town – too innocent to be safe – but cool White, rich White, thrilling White.

To our adolescent minds the evidence that we were not cool, rich or thrilling was as compelling as gravity. Queens Park was the poor part of town. Our shops were irregular, our teachers grim, our parents barely literate. They worked impossible hours for modest pay and were tight-lipped or irritable. Our older brothers and sisters found work in the same dead-end jobs or perched on corners in working hours.

Even Queens Park whites were dysfunctional – dishevelled, drunk, obese, just somehow cracked. We were all comrades in a cesspit. Comrades but, at a drop, competitors constantly conniving a way to climb out. The means of doing so – winning a fight, designer clothes (fake), flaunting caste, class, or colour status.

Our dark skin, full features and our public displays of dysfunction, gave us, the Black kids, the booby prize among the brown kids in our corner. Our morally conservative neighbours, skilled in keeping skeletons locked in the closet, could at least look down upon us. No matter how hard we tried, we would remain in that cesspit. I railed against that, railed and internalised those energies. Then, through my oldest brother, I met Rasta. It was not a matter of theology, respect to that still, but the community, the family, the pride. My brothers' friends would gather in the living room. They were, by turns, serious and fun. They read, reasoned and sang songs of our redemption.

Rasta opened the door to understanding the relationship between disadvantage and Empire. I wore my Rasta pride brightly, inside, but never crossed over into locks. At sixteen, I was able to look out at the world with a sense of possibility and purpose.

Later, much later, I discovered the sociology of race and understood the crap cards our parents had been dealt. I reappraised Queens Park in light of the troubled histories of other towns and cities in Britain. Far from a cesspit, we had something to teach our disunited kingdom, if it cared to look.

Edson Burton

Dr Edson Burton is a poet, drama writer, curator and historian. His radio credits include the supernatural trilogy *Deacon*, starring Don Warrington, now available on Audible.

His theatre writing spans a range of theatre-based, promenade and site-specific work including *The Ithaca Axis* (2013) poetry/theatre show *Curry Goat & Fish Fingers* (2016), a Frederick Douglass dramatization, *An Abolitionist Returns* (2018), the game show-themed *The Edge* (2018) and the ribald *Anansi & the Grand Prize* (2019).

His on-screen history specialist appearances include Hairy Bikers series *Pubs that Made Britain* (2015) *Books that Made Britain* Bristol Sin City (2016), *Lost Civilizations Series 1: The Remains of Slavery* (2017). *The Antiques Road Show* (2018) *Britain's Most Historic Towns: Georgian Bristol* (2019) in addition to regularly appearing on local news and radio in response to Black Lives Matter.

He is the author of the poetry collection *Seasoned* (City Chameleon, 2009), co-author of *What's Your Trinity Story, Vice and Virtue* (2018) and various online and print articles.

Edson is a member of Bristol's History Commission, the film programming collective Come the Revolution and Queer People of Colour Collective Kiki Bristol.

He is the father of two young adults, uncle to a cat and a lover of Easton, Bristol where he resides.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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