

Legacies of Loss - The Black Child in Focus

Gerry German

Let us begin with the understanding of the term *black*. In today's context I don't just mean *non-white* which is a kind of negative, residual, flapping in the wind, left-over symbol of dependence and powerlessness. I mean all those who share a similar set of experiences struggling for meaningful and dignified survival growing, developing and living in an institutionally racist society based on the concept and practice of *white supremacy*.

I mean *black* in all its glory, its power and beauty, its promise and infinite potential. I mean it as movement and restlessness, as goal-oriented and purposeful, as active, reactive and proactive, as holistic involving mind, body and spirit. I mean it as questing and daring, putting away the compass and mapping the terrain step by step while keeping ones eyes on the ever-moving horizon. I mean *black* as aspiration and yearning and fulfilment, reaching for the stars and touching them.

We need a meaningful significant definition that will prevent us and our children falling into the trap of inter-ethnic rivalry and communities conflicts imposed by centuries of skilfully imposed divide and rule strategies.

And what does it mean to be a child? Promise and limitless potential. Unconfined by labels and systems. Those who came because we asked them and for whom we therefore have responsibility. But measured and assessed by dishonest oppressive systems. SEN. ADHD. Dyslexic. Under-achieving. Excluded. Isolated. Rejected. Misunderstood. In need of mentors, mediators and counsellors who despite their good intentions and their skills fail to transform the mainstream - they and their children remain peripheral and on the margins of opportunity.

There is a need to mind our language. Through misuse we create *bad* boys, *naughty* children and *wicked* individuals. Our unthinking copycat usage of bad language creates stupid pupils whose progress is stunted immediately by a word.

The dishonesty of categorising and intelligence testing. The tyranny of the bell curve of the distribution of ability. How school places and option groups exactly match the pool of ability! The dishonest pseudo-scientific nature of selection and streaming and setting and choosing options. Being taught and brainwashed to know one's place in life. Disruption therefore as a kind of honest subversion, perhaps neither under-stood nor articulated by children and young people but deeply felt as a necessary activity despite the institutional consequences.

There is a need to question the increasingly detailed computerised school records about our children since they are undoubtedly negative and destructive and aimed at making the case for isolation, rejection and exclusion.

Loss implies separation from someone or something accompanied by feelings of incompleteness, unfulfilment, separation, isolation or rejection. One can lose a possession or one's job or a loved one. A child can lose a toy but there is a difference when that is due to theft or extortion or perhaps worst of all for a child, punishment which can never be at any time rehabilitating or remedial.

A grown-up can lose a job and be devastated because the hiring and firing system is deemed unfair or whimsical. Bereavement is traumatic because of a misunderstanding of reality dominated by misplaced, uncomprehending thoughts of permanence and physical security.

For our purpose *legacy* is not something specifically willed to us but rather our relationship with the past as we struggle to make sense of the present and carve out a future for ourselves in a confusing, corrupting world of conflicting demands and opportunities. The confusion arises when the natural history of human development is interrupted, obstructed, misinterpreted, when somebody else tells your story without the authority of consultation, negotiation or empathy. Of course, others, the older generation, ancestors, shape the conditions in which we find ourselves, genetically, environmentally and otherwise conditioned and influenced. But we are active participants in the drama of being.

The second dictionary meaning of legacy is *something handed on or left unfinished by a past owner or predecessor*.

What therefore are we talking about when we address the issue of the black child as *legatee* in relation to loss? What has s/he lost? Language, culture, religion, identity, rootedness either totally or in part. Such loss can be traumatic over generations, especially when it is assumed that one's present condition is better because similar to and validated by one's oppressor / superior.

What about people of the Diaspora, the travellers, the migrants, the refugees, the asylum seekers, those in exile for whatever reason? Some retain their language, their culture and their religion but to what extent does the altered or diminished status in an unwelcoming, inhospitable society affect a sense of loss? Western Europe is self-evidently an ethnically diverse society but one in which people cannot freely and confidently be themselves, one where people have constantly to live on the edge.

Some people joke about developing a kind of dual-personality (schizophrenia) in order to avoid the vast labyrinth of lunacy, in the belief that it is easier to deal with one other rather than a myriad shifting personalities invading the space of otherwise confident self-esteem and self-respect.

What is the Black child's legacy in modern, multi-ethnic, individually and institutionally racist Britain? Invaded privacy. Forbidden territory. Denied space. Restricted access. Memories, often vague and dimly perceived, of the importance of class, race and sex in ascending the social, economic and political ladder. Humiliation. Closed doors. Unfulfilled and non autonomous.

The hangover remains. The British Empire graded slaves according to colour, pigmentation and melanin content. There were 16 gradations of colour, including

mulatto, quadroon and octoroon for example. The more white blood one had, the higher one ascended the social, economic and political ladder. People of all shades thought about or talked about good hair and good colour - and classified the worthy accordingly. People internalised, and those at the extreme end of the spectrum, with glowing black skins and restless heads of hair, used the same terminology to describe themselves.

What echoes did they hear? Perhaps, loss or hopelessness. Perhaps, on the other hand, the rhythms and inspirations of Phillip Sherlock's *Jamaican Fisherman*. For fleeting moments or perhaps longer flashes of a better time, their real golden age, they must have thought *I know better but you don't - yet!*

What were their experiences of school but alienation and dislocation because of a lack of relevance, an absence of respect and a distorted reality in what they see of their schools in terms of governance, staffing, curricula and resources. *This is the body of knowledge that is important - you are not really part of it!* The same is true of the outside world too. *You don't really belong. Why don't you admit it and try to be like us?*

And things haven't changed all that much either. I accompanied a Black African-Caribbean family to an exclusions hearing the other day. The panel of adjudicators and the clerical staff were all white. Messages were being given and processed. Suddenly from across the seas, far back in time but memorised like a living ever-present relic, the father could take the charade no more and he expostulated about the *pigmentateous* attitudes of those sitting in judgement. The room suddenly became electrified, and resentment was focused on this intrusive individual who neither played by the rules nor even spoke the language properly. Despite the novelty of the newly coined word, they knew that it was their integrity that was being questioned. We lost the case - as the father knew from the beginning!

Black images were supposed to be projected by means of the multicultural approach to education. But the intermediaries were people who still placed white culture at the top of the hierarchy. They processed the experience of enrichment and whitened and weakened an otherwise positive experience. It was yet again as though black people came into existence because white people, Columbus-like, had discovered them. The vacuum was only partially filled. The dislocation, the sense of loss remained.

Many of you must have seen the video *Coffee Coloured Children*, an account in the most vivid terms of what it means to be coloured, half-caste, mixed race, mixed parentage in a racist society. Children of a white mother and a black father, an absent, lost black father, a rejected, isolated, self-condemning, guilty white mother. Children spending hours in the bath trying to purify themselves and bleach themselves white.

There's the American folk-tale about the creation of the first human beings and how they turned out in different colours: there was a deep tub of water for the dark, slimy creatures to wash themselves clean. It had a leak and the water was running out. The creatures waited their turn. The first ones came out white. The next group found insufficient water and came out brown. The last patient group, those at the end of the

queue, got in the tub only when the last drop of water had run out. That was the beginning of life for black people. Empty containers.

Is this *our* folk-tale? Is it conveying a sense of loss with a light black touch - or is it somehow a white concoction intended to condition still further through amusement and entertainment?

Vidia Naipaul and Wole Soyinka were able as writers to bring an irony to encounters between themselves and colour-line rejectionists. Our children need to hear their stories, even when apocryphal, as real-life experiences.

There is a very real tension. There is a lack of balance and equilibrium. There is a shifting centre of gravity with regular long or short spells of vertigo. On the one hand, there is the devaluing and humiliation inflicted on vulnerable human beings searching for a place in the sun. On the other, there is a kind of hidden memory sometimes intruding itself to the surface of consciousness, about the child's golden age, when there was peace and love and freedom and respect and kindness and empathy and welcome and hospitality and space to be oneself. And therefore no reason for sorrow or sadness or anger or resentment. There was in that time inclusion on equal terms, inclusivity, integration and integrity.

It is not just being a refugee and losing one's country and familiar surroundings, home and family and friends. It is not merely isolation and separation and a falling away of support and inspiration and mentoring. It is living in a world where human values have been betrayed, where nobody seems to care and where faith has been replaced by hopelessness.

And yet these children have their own capacity for recovery, for re-mediation and rehabilitation, for transformation through their self-discovered and self-generated therapeutic skills. What do they need to do so? They need to know that they are free to embark on a voyage of discovery, to explore and to be curious and inquisitive, to ask unexpected and even eccentric and challenging questions, to make mistakes and possibly risk falling off the edge of the world.

Adults need to appreciate that the assertive child doesn't always follow the accepted rules of respectable utterances. *F-Off* is a form of communication suffering from adults' judgmentalism and decontextualisation. It is the child's attempt at autonomy *in extremis*. It is a kind of recollection of rights, not like Wordsworth in tranquillity but in turbulence, not by choice but provocation.

I am reminded of Vera Bell's *Ancestor on the Auction Block*, written in the Forties in still colonial but autonomy and freedom-seeking Jamaica. Her mixture was African, Central American Mayan and Irish. She was black. The first black woman to head a civil service department. The first editor of the Jamaica Welfare Reporter. The first Director of the Jamaica School of Arts and Crafts. She wrote the first Jamaican (Non-English, traditional) pantomime, *Soliday and the Wicked Bird*. In the UK she was patron of the Black Young Writers Competition started by Len Garrison and the African-Caribbean Educational Resource Project.

She was part of a vigorous across the generations group of writers and artists led and inspired by Edna Manley as part however of a collective courting and courted by the muse and discovering self-respect, relevance and reality through reverie and

rhapsody as a means of casting off the shackles of white, male, middle-class logic with its soon reached limits to self-discovery.

I often wonder why adults, especially teachers, fear and forbid day-dreaming, perhaps the freest and most creative state for children to discover truth and value as well as their capacity for imagining and imaging a world worthy of people. My own sweet memories of the ten minutes or so before sleeping when nobody could interfere with my snapshots and moving pictures of the world I wanted for myself and of course others without whom my world was incomplete. My fellow-travellers included those I admired from afar and could not approach or those I had approached only to experience hot flushes of embarrassment.

I ritualised day-dreaming for one period a week when I taught at the Isaac Newton School up the Ladbroke Grove. We broke the barriers and stormed the barricades and invaded Holland Park where we created a haven of welcome, equality, freedom and justice. We were secure from fear and intimidation. We made good the loss. We developed that most important ingredient of human life, empathy, a quality so much missing from modern life with its narrowly conceived National Curriculum and its confining set of criteria for measuring success and progress.

To make good the loss, we need to know what it means to walk in somebody else's moccasins. Bullying persists in British schools because of a lack of empathy among students and staff. Teachers have too many careless hurtful throwaway lines for students and their parents because of a lack of sensitivity.

Elinor Kelly's research into adolescents' 'racial' attitudes following the death of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah at the hands of 13 year old Darren Goulbourne revealed the vacuum of negativity in the lives of 13 and 15 year old boys and girls in 3 schools in Manchester, two co-educational and one boys' school. Unsurprisingly there was a substantial number of children who subscribed to Fascist National Front ideas. It was a great surprise to find that there was an equally large number of young people who subscribed to ideas of 'racial' justice.

But there was a profound difference between the two groups. The NF group had a terminology, a vocabulary and a framework for action while the others were in a kind of conceptual and linguistic limbo - institutional racism at its worst. No change possible. No progress imminent or likely or in the future. And yet there was the example of the young Asian boy who stood up for a Year 7 boy. He replaced Britain's national legacy of loss with selfless, courageous, fulfilled action.

But his example has not been followed. His energy and vibrations have not filled the empty spaces around so many of us. Is that perhaps because of our general indifference to loss and deprivation? Is the negative seen as our natural state rather than the positive? Does loss therefore fit in with our lives as indifferent and disenchanting because of loss and denial through disengagement? Does the atmosphere of the home in the hands of the parents and carers, and the ethos of the schools run by teachers perhaps reflect the negativity of our short-circuited and misunderstood experiences of life?

Why is it that much of Western European life is characterised by meanness and selfishness instead of generosity and magnanimity, anger instead of patience, hostility instead of respect, competitiveness instead of co-operation, turbulence instead of peace? Such an environment makes it difficult to cope with and adjust to loss.

But I conclude with a reference to Oprah Winfrey's recent television programme featuring Toni Morrison's latest book *The Bluest Eye*. Toni Morrison reminded viewers of the best way of making up for loss and restoring Black children in all their splendour. She asked simply but profoundly as we should ask ourselves as parents, teachers and adults playing any role - *Do your eyes light up when your children come into the room?* That is the moment of recovery, the first step on the individual and collective, shared, supported, *short* road to recovery.