
Mandela, Manchester: a response to establishment pessimism

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ABSTRACT This article includes some of the remarkable poems to be included in *Mandela, Manchester*, an anthology of school students' work dedicated to the inspirational life of Nelson Mandela

During a much-reported speech in Manchester in 2005, Trevor Phillips, now in charge of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, made a series of ominous predictions about the future of Britain's major cities and their mixed populations. In his view of the future:

Some districts are on their way to becoming fully-fledged ghettos,
black holes into which no one goes without fear and trepidation,
and from which no one ever escapes undamaged. The walls are
going up around many of our urban communities, and the bridges
are crumbling. And here is where I think we are: we are
sleepwalking our way to segregation.

These grim forecasts have been ably and scientifically exposed and refuted by population studies statisticians from Manchester University Nissa Finney and Ludi Simpson. They produced a lucid riposte to Phillips and all the other purveyors of unfactual stories about race, migration, the making of ghettos and 'white flight' (such as the pernicious MigrationWatch UK), in their recently-published and essential book *Sleepwalking to Segregation? Challenging Myths about Racism and Immigration*.^[1] In the book Finney & Simpson argue:

We find that many of the claims surrounding segregation,
immigration and dangerous cultures turn out to be myths,
unsustainable in the face of the evidence.

Such rebuttals are also to be found within student interactions, relationships and creativity all through Manchester secondary schools – as I have repeatedly

found over the last year in the poetry workshops which I have held with school students in many neighbourhoods of the City.

In July 2008, Nelson Mandela celebrated his ninetieth birthday with the world; and Manchester City Council decided to add to the commemorations by commissioning the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Trust [2] and the University of Manchester to publish an anthology of school students' poems dedicated to Mandela and with the proceeds going to the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund. The Centre was established a decade ago, with the purpose of opposing racist ideas by working with university departments, schools and communities, building up resources, publishing new curriculum materials and promoting activities to affirm diversity and counteract racism. Its name remembers the 15-year-old boy of Bangladeshi roots who was murdered in a Manchester school in 1986, after defending his friend from a racist attack. Within the anthology called *Mandela, Manchester* [3], a 14-year-old present-day student at Ahmed's School, Tuseef Ishfaq, remembers Ahmed's sacrifice:

*Ahmed Iqbal Ullah
Confident, strong, brave,
He has true friendship,
He has now left this world.
I am appalled by this offence!
It's like my heart's lost hope.
Who could be this cruel?
But I realise, gangsters are.
Ahmed Iqbal Ullah
Why did he have to go?
He had his future in front of him.
He did it for his mate
He saved his friend from a tragedy.
Now I realise
How brave he was.*

And as he wrote this poem, a busy White classmate set down his own words under the title 'Stop Racism, Full Stop':

*Racism, I don't like it
Racism, it should be like spit
It should stay in, not come out –
People are scared to go outside
Because people stand there messing about.
Kids should play lots of games
Not go out and be called racist names.
As humans, we have rights,
So be kind, don't have fights.
Don't let anyone's death be in vain,
All the crying and the pain.
We should not go out and be shot*

*Racism should be like a dot.
Stop racism, full stop!*
Stephen McCluskey

The poems are a commentary on the rapid growth over two or three decades of a huge northern cosmopolis and its classrooms, full to each brim with young people in all their diversity, living, learning and befriending together in an urban context that was unknown, just a single generation ago. *Mandela, Manchester* is not just a collective praisesong to the South African's long and exemplary life of struggle and achievement; its focus is upon Manchester and its people, especially its youth and what they can accomplish together. This is what its young poets take from a great human being of the century before theirs:

*Mandela in Manchester?
Is that true?
Is he here?
For me and you?
No, not quite.
His spirit is here
Not the man himself.
It's in and around Manchester
And also in yourself.*
Rachael Perkins

There are poems of insight and critical consciousness about the city and its problems, poems of fear and hope, about the social scourge of gun and knife crime, of drugs, racism and bullying, poverty and homelessness. There are also poems of love for Manchester and its communities, for friends and family – particularly for grandparents and the generations who migrated and arrived here – and testimonies of living in a new city with all its advantages as well as its uncertainties. For example:

*I was not born here
Nor was my family,
But it feels like home
Home for me, home for you.
Manchester welcomes you
With open arms.
Manchester isn't perfect,
Not at all,
But home it is.
The people are friendly,
And the town is warm,
But not all is well.*

And there are so many contradictory viewpoints and experiences. Two 14-year-old girls, Seher and Tasmiah, from different schools and neighbourhoods, give their own perspectives:-

My City
Manchester, my city
A place where I grew up.
New people come every day,
Children play loudly in the streets.
Harmony circulates,
Everyone is happy
Jumpy with excitement,
Schools full with a rush of children.

and

How can I sleep at night
Knowing there's gun crime
How can I sleep at night
Knowing violence is taking over the world.
How can I sleep at night
Knowing people are full of sorrow.
How can I sleep at night
Knowing racism is there.
One day, soon, I know
I will get a good night's sleep.

Yet, the salient note of all these poems is unity. Here are young people confronting life together, in all their difference, with a combined will to change it for the better. As Anthony Hall writes about his part of the city, recognisable to many thousands of inner-city teachers from all over Britain – for it will resemble all the realities of the neighbourhoods where their own school stands:-

Cheetham Hill, it is just one of those places.
Full of different religions and different races.
We all come together to join as one.
Cheetham Hill, Cheetham Hill – that's where I'm from.
I'm not trying to say it's easy, because I know life's hard.
There is abuse and racism, emotions are scarred.
We all come together to join as one.
Cheetham Hill, Cheetham Hill – that's where I'm from.
We all live together and breathe each other's air.
All we want is to all be treated fair!

As a response to Phillips' pessimism and despair, these voices ring into the present and the future. They are anything but complacent, facing problems, contemplating solutions, moving and sounding in unison and humanity, to heal division and contrariness. No 'sleepwalking' here, and even less segregation,

they sound with all the vibrancy of a new life in the making in one of our great cities.

As recorded, for example, by Adrianna Jedrychowska, looking and imbibing all around her from a Manchester bus:

Getting on a bus.
Looking through the window.
Full of life!
Full of people!
Laughing, shouting ...
Eating, shouting ...
Rhythm of Manchester!

Notes

- [1] Nissa Finney & Ludi Simpson (2009) *Sleepwalking to Segregation? Challenging Myths about Racism and Immigration*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- [2] Information about the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Centre, its activities and publications, is available from 0161 2752920 or at <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/racerelations>
- [3] *Mandela, Manchester* will be published by the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Centre in July 2009. Contact 0161 2752920 for copies.

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