

Living the crisis through ten moments

Ben Carrington

A story told in ten moments

Moment One

He is five years old. He is happy. Technically, he is not five just yet. He is four and a half, as he likes to tell people. But in his mind he is five - then, he thinks, he will be taken seriously. Five is when you start primary school and get to wear a uniform. He hopes it will have red in it. He likes the colour red. It's his favourite colour. It is the summer of 1977. 7th June. The boy with the afro is full of innocence. He is told that, along with the nations of the Commonwealth, today all of Britain is celebrating The Queen's Silver Jubilee. He imagines every street in the world is having a party at this same moment. He doesn't know what the Commonwealth is but it seems like a good thing. He's not sure what Britain is either, but he is told that he is British, and it sounds important, so he is happy that he is British. British like everyone else on the Sidcup street where his grandparents live. And the Queen, whoever she is, looks pretty in her bright pink hat and pink dress. She looks just like the stamps. He is a bit confused when he is told that today is not the Queen's birthday but the anniversary of her *becoming Queen*. He thinks it funny that you can celebrate becoming yourself. The boy wears his favourite red and white striped shirt. He has a British flag. And the flag has red in it. So he likes the flag. He waves it as hard as he can, as everyone on Cavendish Avenue sings songs he doesn't understand about something called Britannia. His football team will be Liverpool because they wear red and one day he will play for them. He doesn't like blue, else he would have to support Chelsea. Or worse, Everton. He is thus doubly lucky in liking red. He hopes the Queen has a Silver Jubilee every

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1977 Jubilee celebrations, Sidcup, Kent

year. He gets to stand at the front for the photo, although he ends up next to the twins, whom he doesn't much like. But otherwise he is happy on this English summer's day, standing in the middle of the street. He belongs. Along with everyone else. He hopes his mum will be proud of him for being so British. The ground beneath him is firm. He is settled. And he gets to keep his flag, with the red in it.

Moment Two

He clutches his mother's hand. For the first time the boy sees fear in his mother's eyes. It is not the crowd, or the noise, that initially worries him. It is the realisation that his mother may not be able to protect him. He thinks of himself as a brave boy. He wants to protect his mother from whatever it is that is causing her to look so concerned. But he is scared too. The chanting grows louder. The boy and his mother move quickly into a nearby building, off Lewisham High Street, and run up the stairs. There are others hiding there too. Strangers with pensive expressions. The boy looks out from the window and sees signs that say 'Clear the Muggers off the Streets' and 'Keep Britain White'. The boy doesn't understand the words or their significance but he senses this is why his mother looks scared. As the crowd approaches, the boy grips his mum's hand harder. She tells her son to move away from the window so he can't be seen. The all-white crowd, mainly male but with a few women, are being

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escorted by the police as people on the side shout at them. They eventually move past and down the street. He is confused. If they are bad, he wonders, why are the police protecting them? Apart from the uniforms, the police and the marchers look the same to him. For months and years after, in fact into his adulthood, the boy will have a recurring nightmare that he is being chased by a mob, through narrow streets, as he hides in buildings. He will try and suppress this moment of crisis, but it will never fully leave him. The men with hate in their eyes are holding the same flag he was waving earlier in the summer. He notices, too, that they are singing the song he sang: 'Rule Britannia, Britannia Rules the waves, Britons, never, never, never, shall be slaves'. Were they angry at the Queen? Who were these muggers they wanted to get rid of? And why was his mother so scared? At home, later that evening, a pale man appears on the TV news. He is called Martin Webster, one of the organisers of the march. He is from the National Front. The man barks: 'We believe that the multi-racial society is wrong, is evil and we want to destroy it'. The boy goes to his bedroom, collects his Jubilee flag and slowly places it in the bin. The ground beneath his feet no longer feels solid. Something in his world has ruptured.

Moment Three

He is eight years old. The news is full of pictures that disturb him. He sees cars on fire, young black men throwing bottles and bricks at the police. He sees police officers bleeding. Windows are smashed. Politicians announce that unemployment and racism are no excuses for the actions of the youths, but it is not clear to him what is happening or why. He sees image after image of young black men being chased, being arrested, fighting with the police. They have afros like his. Some have dreadlocks. They look angry and threatening. Brixton is burning, they say. White experts discuss the riots. He hears terms like 'West Indian culture', Rastafarianism, assimilation, the breakdown of 'law and order', 'sus laws' and muggers. It appears that black people are the problem. Margaret Thatcher, the woman whom everyone in his family despises, especially his gran, comes on to the TV. She says the government will not tolerate such lawlessness by criminal gangs. He doesn't understand why the black youths are doing what they are doing. He fears going to school the next day in case he will be blamed for the looting and flames. He feels embarrassed. He worries he will be looked at differently. He wishes he wasn't black. He is angry at his white mother for meeting his Nigerian father. He is so close to being white. But now he

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senses he will be associated with the rioters. *The muggers*. At this moment he wishes he was something else. Something different. Not black.

Moment Four

He has been walking for forty-five minutes but is only half way there. He is 10. He likes to visit his grandparents in the leafy suburbs of Sidcup in North Kent, leaving behind the cold concrete of Thamesmead in south London. In Sidcup there are quiet tree-lined roads, semi-detached houses, parks with streams, and, importantly, Cadbury's chocolates, Monster Munch crisps and Coca-Cola, provided by his gran. His mum doesn't understand why he walks for an hour and a half to his grandparents so often, only to be driven home by his uncles. He is not ashamed of coming from Thamesmead, but Sidcup feels safer. It reminds him of his younger childhood. A happy space. Thamesmead is where Stanley Kubrick filmed his dystopic tale *A Clockwork Orange*. But Thamesmead is not a science fiction imagining, it is his grey, bleak, concrete home. It is time to return home. His uncles are not around to drive him back so his gran gives him money to catch the bus on

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a route that goes near Eltham. He is waiting at the bus stop. Three slightly older white boys look in his direction. ‘What’s the coon doing here?’. ‘Yeah, Sambo, why you here?’. He pretends not to hear. He is worried that he might get attacked. His pulse quickens. They stare at him but he doesn’t return the gaze. After a few seconds pass, he decides to walk away, to avoid any confrontation. ‘Yeah, that’s right, nigger, walk away’. He misses his bus. It is dark by the time he finally gets home. He feels traumatised but he does not tell anyone. He decides to avoid catching the bus that goes that way in future. Hyper-aware of his own body, from now on he will move through the spaces of Kentish London differently, cautiously, self-consciously. No public space feels safe; he feels out of place.

Moment Five

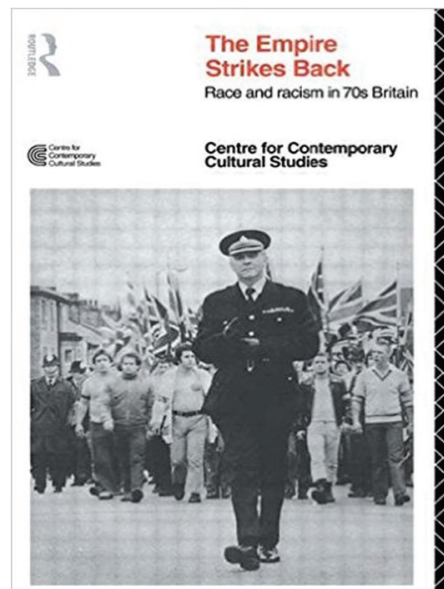
He is a student, at Loughborough University, not far from Birmingham. He still wants to become a professional football player, but he knows, deep down, that will not happen now. He will not play for Liverpool after all. Instead he is playing for his university team. It is early evening on the streets of Oxford. He and his teammate, a fellow working-class student from the south, are wandering along Broad Street. The very same street, no doubt, that a Jamaican Rhodes scholar in the 1950s would have walked down. The post-match drink is at Balliol College. A youngish man approaches, with an over-confident stride. He has a long, oddly-coloured scarf wrapped around his neck, flowing behind him. ‘Scuse us mate, any idea where Balliol is?’. The man with the scarf, stops mid-stride, gives directions and asks why they are going to Balliol. The Loughborough students explain they are looking for a post-match party, having played Oxford at football earlier in the day. The student with the scarf asks who won. ‘We did’. With the arrogance that only an English private school education, topped off with an Oxbridge degree, can produce, he replies, ‘Well, yes, that’s about right. *You guys* are good are winning football matches. *We’re* good at running governments’. With that he continues on his path, down the street and, most likely, into the current Conservative government.

Moment Six

He is twenty and in his second year of university. The tutor recognises the intellectual promise in the student that the student does not yet see in himself. ‘So,

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what are you interested in?' The student begins his list: playing football, going for a curry, R&B, raving, Soul II Soul, Arrested Development. 'No', the tutor cuts him off. 'What are your *academic* interests?' The student feels embarrassed. 'Oh'. He thinks for a moment. Then lists his areas. Sociology. Politics. Anti-racism. Class. Popular culture. Youth Culture. Identity. Feminism. Anti-colonialism. Marxism. Theory. He pauses and adds to the growing list: 'And how to get rid of the Tories'. The tutor smiles. He asks if the student has read the work of Stuart Hall. He hasn't. The student enquires which of those topics this Stuart Hall fella has written on. 'All of them', comes the reply. The student laughs, then quickly realises his tutor isn't joking. The tutor hands the student two books. 'Have a look at these, return them once you're done'. The student reads the titles, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in post-war Britain* and the second, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. 'Oh, and you'll probably want to read this one too'. The student takes the third book and scans the title, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*. The cover image immediately brings back a painful and not quite faded memory from his childhood and discomfits the student. Later, back in his dorm, he reads the following: 'Policing *the blacks* threatened to mesh with the problem of policing *the poor* and policing the *unemployed*: all three were concentrated in precisely the same urban areas - a fact which of course provided that element of geographical homogeneity which facilitates the germination of a militant consciousness. The on-going problem of policing the blacks had become, for all practical purposes, synonymous with the wider problem of *policing the crisis*'. And he understood. Later he will speak on the phone with his mum. She asks if he has heard the news. A young man called Stephen Lawrence has been stabbed to death at a bus stop in Eltham, having missed the last bus home, heading back to Thamesmead. They think it was yet another racist attack in the area but the police haven't arrested anyone yet. And he understood.



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Moment Seven

He is a studying for a PhD. He is twenty-three and giving his first ever academic presentation at the British Sociological Association's annual conference. He is nervous. He walks by a room and sees a man quietly sitting by himself, making a few notes on a piece of paper. He immediately recognises the man. It is Stuart Hall. He is surprised that Hall is alone. Surely he should have people all around him, talking to him, asking for his autograph? Or bodyguards or something? He stands outside the room trying to work out what to do. He wants to go in and introduce himself. He wants to tell Hall how much his work has meant to him. That through Hall's ideas and words, he has been able to make sense of his own life, and the world around him. That without Hall's work he would never have found a space within the academy. He wonders about asking Hall if he will write the preface to his book, once it is finished. After all, he wrote a preface to a book by John Hargreaves called *Sport, Power and Culture*. His book will be better than Hargreaves', a book that doesn't engage with race sufficiently, and his book will have 'race' and 'politics' in the title. He thinks Hall would approve. 'No, that will be terrible!', he thinks to himself. 'Everyone probably asks Hall to do this or that for them. Why should he, he doesn't even know me?'. The young PhD student wisely decides, instead, to simply introduce himself and wish him well with the presidential address that Hall is about to give. He looks in again. Hall is still jotting down notes on a scrap of paper. After a few more seconds pass, the student plucks up the courage, takes two steps towards the door, then loses his nerve, turns and walks away without speaking to Hall.

Moment Eight

He feels like he will have to do something, but he is not quite sure what. It is 1999, he is now in his late twenties and has a job as a lecturer in sociology at Brighton University. For the second time in as many minutes the man sitting to his left has heckled Stuart Hall. Hall is giving a lecture to a packed audience at the Institute of Education in central London. The talk focuses on the changes to British identity spanning the arrival of the Windrush into Tilbury docks, to the Scarman Report into the Brixton riots, to the recently published inquiry into Stephen Lawrence's death. Hall makes a connection between British colonialism and the subsequent post-war migration from the colonies: 'We are here because you were there', he says.

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On hearing this the man interjects again, shouting out, 'Two wrongs don't make a right. The British working class were never asked if they wanted the immigrants!'. There are a few ineffective looks in his direction, but it is clear that the man intends to shout down Hall and disrupt the talk. So he decides to intervene. He has to. He looks around to confirm the man is by himself. The heckler is middle-aged and broad shouldered. He decides to switch vernacular codes, to draw upon his south London habitus. Coming from Thamesmead must be useful for something, right? He slowly walks along the row of chairs and sits behind the man. He leans forward, and purposefully wraps both arms around man's shoulders, and quietly whispers into his ear, 'Listen, this isn't a public debate, it's a lecture. We've come to listen to Stuart give his talk, and you're going to shut the fuck up'. The man is startled, and shouts out, 'I'm being accosted!'. 'No you're not. If you have a question you can ask it at the end. But you're gonna shut the fuck up now so we can all listen to the lecture, *got that?*'. He emphasises the last two words so it is clear it's an instruction to be followed, not a question to be answered. The heckler goes quiet. The boy from Thamesmead returns to his seat, his heart pounding. He sits, listening to the rest of Hall's talk. He feels almost unclean from having got so close to this man. His intervention proves successful; the man remains quiet for the rest of the lecture. Despite this success he feels oddly unnerved. After the talk Mark Perryman, one of the organisers, comes over and thanks him for intervening. He adds, 'You do know who that was, don't you?'. 'No'. 'That was Martin Webster, the former leader of the National Front'.

Moment Nine

It is February 2014. He goes through his morning routine. He turns on his computer. He has an email from a friend in South Africa. *No. That can't be true.* Maybe the news is wrong. He has another email from England, and another from Chicago. They all have the same despairing message. He feels sick. Stuart Hall has died. He starts to cry. He has never cried before at the passing of a public figure. Especially one he hardly knew. He feels embarrassed at his tears, but he cannot stop himself. A friend who runs a blog asks if he can write a short memorial. He declines. Now is not the time to write, he thinks. Not now. His friend asks again. He decides to write something. The words, for once, flow. He writes: 'But for Hall I wouldn't have become an academic. There was no space for someone like me before Hall. Discovering the field of Cultural Studies as an undergraduate, I found

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validation and recognition. Suddenly, my background and way of life as a working-class black kid mattered and was important beyond the confines of south London ... Most intellectuals are known for contributing to our knowledge on a particular topic or specific theme. Hall was different. He created an entire new academic discipline, and then mentored just about every significant scholar that came through Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 80s. Hall did not give me my voice, but he created



1977 Jubilee celebrations, Sidcup, Kent, detail

the conditions under which it was possible for me to speak, be heard and to do so with an enriched conceptual vocabulary ... He made it possible for at least two generations of black British scholars to see ourselves as “thinkers” and not mere objects of sociological curiosity. In so doing, Hall forever transformed white academia and intellectual life in Britain and elsewhere’.

Moment 10

He is a university professor. He opens his email. There is an invitation to speak at a conference on Stuart Hall. He isn't sure whether to accept. Until now he has declined such invitations. He searches for an email that he received a few years earlier, a correspondence he'd almost forgotten about. He finds the email written in response to an essay he had published called 'Improbable Grounds: The emergence of the black British intellectual'. He reads the reply. It says: 'Dear Ben. Thanks very much for sending me the essay. It is fascinating. I have saved it to read in a more leisurely moment, but I wanted to acknowledge its receipt at once. I will try to send you a more informed comment when I've done so. You are quite right of course to speak of my ambivalence. I have written and am writing again about this and how it was resolved. I only wanted to say that it was principally an ambivalence about what it was to be a Jamaican, since in my youth and childhood the way I was brought up was to feel some ambivalence about my relationship to my own culture and of

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course nobody I knew ever referred to themselves or other Jamaicans as “black”. The sight of black migrants streaming out of Paddington station and the thought that most of us could never “go back home” (as we were constantly asked) in a literal sense again and could never return the same as we had left, was transformatory. Most of what I’ve written about identity since began with this recognition. How I came to come to terms with my own identity is another story, but as I said then, it had to do with the fact that migrant communities cannot remain fixed in an old relationship to the past. They and I, as I predicted, have been remade by the migrant experience. Lamming says our generation became West Indian in London and I became West Indian and a “black intellectual” in the diaspora. I’m sorry I can’t write at great length but I am making a very slow recovery from a kidney transplant operation which has left me very weak and energy-less. Best Stuart Hall’. He finishes reading the email with tears rolling down his face. From beyond the boundary of this life, Hall has provided him with an idea he can work with, think with, and the courage to speak. A way to come to terms with his own biographical journey, the moments of personal crisis and public rupture, that can only be understood through a radical contextualisation. He recalls a line from a previous Hall essay: ‘Identity is formed at the unstable point where the “unspeakable” stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture’. He begins to ponder his own unspeakable stories, that he denied to himself, let alone told others, and the constant dialectical struggle between the psychological and the political, the autobiographical and the historical. The professor picks up an old photograph from 1977 that he has near his desk. He sees a younger version of himself, dressed in a red and white striped shirt, looking so innocent, so happy, grounded. He recalls how the boy felt just a short while after when he was caught up in the Battle of Lewisham as the press dubbed it at the time. He wishes he could reach back through time and tell that terrified and confused boy looking out through the window that everything would be okay. That he didn’t have to pretend he wasn’t scared. That his mother loved him and was trying to protect him that day. That one day he would be able to make sense of the New Times into which he was born and that his voice would matter. He reflects too, that he would also listen to that young boy, not just speak to him. He ponders what he might still learn from the smiling boy in the photo about himself, things he had forgotten, buried away. He looks at the last photo taken with his mum, the day he was awarded his PhD. The version of her he likes to recall just before the cancer took hold. He imagines the pride she must have had in him at the moment. Within just eight

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months of the photograph being taken she would be dead. Aged forty-nine. He wishes he could have given her a copy of his book, to have seen her face light up, but he didn't finish it in time. Instead he dedicates the book to her: 'For my mother, who made everything possible. Clare Anne Carrington (1955-2005)'. Hall didn't write the preface. He never got around to asking him. But better than that, Hall is on the inside of the text. On every page. In each conceptual turn. In the interpretive frame, asking questions, pushing him to think at the limit. And, of course, the book's cover has red on it. The boy with the afro aged four and a half would be happy. His mum would be proud. He accepts the invitation.

Mum and son, 2004



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Ben Carrington teaches sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and is a Carnegie Senior Research Fellow at Leeds Beckett University. He still supports Liverpool, and despite a pessimism of the intellect regarding their forlorn form, he hopes that this is the year, finally, for Liverpool FC to win the league championship. Forever red.

Soundings
is thinking ahead

Recent themes have included:
alternatives to neoliberalism, identity politics,
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‘helps to keep my faith in an intellectual left alive’

— Lawrence Grossberg —

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