

‘When you score you’re English, when you miss you’re Black’: Euro 2020 and the racial politics of a penalty shoot-out

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Will belonging always be contingent for Black
English footballers?

When the whistle blew at the end of extra time in the Euro 2020 final between England and Italy, more than the outcome of a drawn football match was at stake. As the players faced a nerve-racking penalty shoot-out, two different visions of England’s past and future were held in the balance. Gareth Southgate’s team full of young Black players like Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho had come to symbolise the face of England’s multicultural present. Yet at the same time the shadow of England’s past loomed: during the 1970s and 1980s England fans would routinely sing in stadia ‘there ain’t no Black in the union Jack, send the bastards back’. Which version of England would prevail as the referee blew his whistle to start the penalties?

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Long before the final, a controversy had been gathering around the England team and the politics of race. The England team had committed to ‘taking the knee’ before every fixture, in solidarity with the global ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, adopting a practice that had originated with the American footballer Colin Kaepernick in 2016. Kaepernick had refused to stand during the national anthem when it was sung before a match, later stating: ‘I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color ... to me this is bigger than football’.¹ This protest came to the UK when Aston Villa, captained by England player Tyron Mings, alongside their Sheffield United opponents, took the knee in the first English Premier League game after the 2020 lockdown.

The England team were subjected to widespread abuse after the protest in the Euros, and have been repeatedly booed by their own fans. Criticised by Conservative MPs and B-list celebrities alike, these sportsmen drew political ire for using their position to strike the pose in protest. Actor Laurence Fox - who came to public prominence as a critic of ‘political correctness’ after claiming on BBC’s *Question Time* that Meghan Markle was not a victim of racism - went as far as to declare that he hoped England would lose.² Home Secretary Priti Patel, whose parents emigrated to the UK in the 1960s, but who continues to uphold anti-immigrant border policies within the UK, boldly stated that fans had the right to boo the England team, who were indulging in ‘gesture politics’.³

This hypocrisy from government spokespeople didn’t go unnoticed by former and current England players. Gary Neville, England’s most capped right back, who played alongside Gareth Southgate during Euro 96, suggested that defending racism should start ‘at the very top’. Speaking to Sky News, he said:

... the Prime Minister said that it was OK for the population of this country to boo those players who were trying to promote equality and defend against racism. It starts at the very top ... the fact of the matter is there is an issue obviously in football [and] there is an issue in society where we feel it’s acceptable basically to criticise players for sporting actions because of the colour of their skin. But I have to say accepting and validating those players who take the knee, are promoting equality and inclusion, and defending against racism [has] to come from the very top. You know full well that if your parents do something, your children will follow.⁴

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As the penalty shoot-out unfolded against England, and young Black players failed to score one after another, the stirring of England's past and its legacy of empire and racial nationalism rumbled like a culturequake through social media, but also in streets and neighbourhoods up and down the country. Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho were all targeted for missing from the penalty spot, but it was what they stood for that was being attacked. As sports sociologist Ben Carrington wrote in the *Guardian*: 'the promised New England that was to be magically birthed through football evaporated inside ten minutes and three misplaced penalty kicks. It turns out that the symbolic weight placed on those young Black men, as well as the inherent unpredictability of sports, proved too much to bear'.⁵

What is so telling is how *contingent* the forms of belonging are for Black players within football culture. England footballing legend John Barnes anticipated this before the final and penalty shootout. As a pioneering Black footballer who had been born in Jamaica, Barnes knew all too well how contingent was his inclusion, and that of other Black players, to the nation. He explained to Emily Maitless for BBC's *Newsnight* on 30 June 2021:

My Englishness ... only applies when I am playing well for England. When I didn't play well for England my Jamaicanness became very apparent to the public but when I played well that's when I became English ... When things are going well from a footballing perspective Raheem Sterling, Marcus Rashford they feel English, they are accepted as being part of England but when Marcus Rashford missed that goal [for Manchester United] against Villarreal [in the Europa League, 2021] after all the good work he did for the NHS he got racist abuse.⁶

When Emily Maitless pressed him, John Barnes continued prophetically: 'whoever misses the penalty ... they [Black players] will get a harder time than the white players'. That's the contingency that hangs over Black footballers: if they score they are English heroes, but if they miss then they are Black outsiders.

After a weekend of racist feeding frenzy on social media attacking England's Black footballers, Marcus Rashford's mural in the Withington area of Manchester, painted by street artist Akse P19 in November 2020, was defaced with the racist graffiti - 'shite in a bucket, bastard', 'fuck Sancho', and 'fuck Saka'. Another mural,

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painted in Darlington to support the three players in the week that followed, was also defaced. The red and white design showed the three players’ shirt numbers - 25, 17 and 11. It was defaced with the scrawled words ‘we do not stand with the 3 Black Lions’.⁷ While racism might have circulated in new ways through digital media, it bore all the predictable hallmarks of English racism’s past.

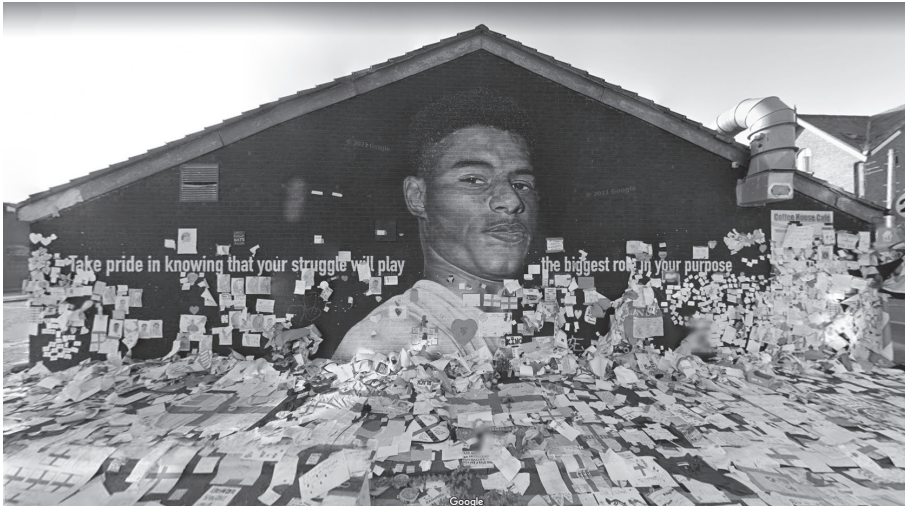
What has changed and what hasn’t

It would be a mistake to conclude from all this that these extraordinary events were indicative of a total victory for England’s racist past. Sport doesn’t reflect society, but it is a place where national identities - past and future - are played out in public. This year marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity and Multiculture in the English Game*, which was the first extensive study of racism in English football.⁸ Thinking back to that study in the midst of Euro 2020, it is striking how open and confident Black footballers have become in speaking out openly against racism, in ways that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. And in so doing they are backed by a larger percentage of the population than would have been the case in the past.

There was a massive outpouring of support for Marcus Rashford in response to the defacement of the mural. Within hours of the news emerging, members of the local community and beyond had begun to leave handwritten messages of support for Rashford and his teammates. What was mobilised was a shared sense of locality, and a feeling that the racist defacement had violated a shared sense of multiracial affinity that Rashford has come to symbolise in south Manchester. It is notable that Rashford signals this local sense of belonging in the way that he describes himself as being of this place. As Paul Gilroy has observed, multicultural life often takes on reworked and more convivial and inclusive forms at a local scale.⁹

Alongside this outpouring of support, a Crowdfunder was created the day after the vandalism by the Withington Walls Project, the community street art project that had funded the original mural, to help repair and protect it. In the words of the project: ‘1 negative act led to 1000s of positive acts’. Within two weeks nearly £40,000 was raised, with surplus funds beyond what was necessary to repair, protect and preserve the mural being donated to FareShare Greater Manchester.¹⁰ To celebrate Black History Month in 2021, the mural, replete with the messages of support, has appeared on Google Street View.¹¹ The messages have since been

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The Marcus Rashford mural, July 2021

removed and taken to Manchester Central Library, and Manchester City Council is working on plans to preserve them permanently with a view to publicly displaying them at some point in the future.¹²

It was all too easy for those in politics to now condemn hate speech on Twitter, including Patel, who tweeted her support for the team. In an extraordinary moment, Tyrone Mings, who had been one of the most passionate advocates of the England team ‘taking a knee’ before the games, condemned the Home Secretary’s hypocrisy on his Twitter account: ‘You don’t get to stoke the fire at the beginning of the tournament by labelling our anti-racism message as “Gesture Politics” and then pretend to be disgusted when the very thing we’re campaigning against, happens’.¹³ Mings’s political confidence and fearless articulacy is striking, especially when compared to the inhibition and fear of speaking out of twenty years ago.

Marcus Rashford, who had become a prominent anti-poverty activist long before Euro 2020, commented with gentle defiance: ‘I will never apologise for who I am ... I’m Marcus Rashford, 23-year-old Black man from ... south Manchester. If I have nothing else, I have that.’ This irrevocable and undeniable statement of belonging perhaps expresses the fact of English multiculturalism more powerfully than any other recent statement by a public figure. On 14 July 2021, *The Greater Manchester News* reported that a huge digital mural had been installed in Trafford, close to the

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Manchester United ground. This mural portrayed Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka in their England shirts, and with graffiti crowns drawn on their heads. The caption was: ‘Never apologise for who you are’.¹⁴

One of the issues that has remained consistent since the study we conducted two decades ago is that the way in which racism is understood in football is part of the problem. Back then racism was seen as being confined to right-wing ‘hooligans’ and anti-social fans. They were the problem. So dealing with the issue of racism was organised away from the institutions of sport. Today, this absence of self-examination takes the form of a focus on social media as the problem, or the spectacle of crude racism from right-wing fans abroad: for those inside the white institutions of the game racism needs to be happening somewhere else. An example of this is the ‘monkey chants’ directed at Raheem Sterling during England’s world cup qualifier in Budapest in September 2021. Yet in the lead up to Euro 2020, Sterling’s form and his selection were questioned, despite him subsequently proving himself to be England’s best player.¹⁵

While Black footballers have become the English game’s life blood, this diversity is not extended to coaching, management or administration, or to those who control football. As Colin King has pointed out, English football remains colonised and regulated by a normative whiteness that structures its institutions.¹⁶ Paul Ian Campbell has highlighted the whiteness of footballing institutions in a shocking study of Black ex-footballers and after retirement. He describes networks of coaching and managing as overwhelmingly white spaces in which Black ex-footballers have to tolerate racist banter and common-sense in order to ‘fit in’.¹⁷

In this, football is, of course, a reflection of a wider world. As Ben Carrington comments, the frenzy of racism that followed England’s defeat needs to be situated within a broader political and economic context. These include: ‘the political and economic realignments following Brexit, the lingering effects of the global pandemic that has torn asunder the social fabric of British society, and the unresolved post-imperial crisis of Englishness that remains wedded to an unacknowledged attachment to white supremacy and the continuing denial of racism in this country’.¹⁸

An inclusive Englishness?

The lesson of the tournament is that the struggle for New England is not a linear

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movement forward towards a more inclusive Englishness. But neither has there been a return to the melancholic whiteness of England's past. One of the things that sport spectacles like Euro 2020 offer is an opportunity to weigh the balance of these forces. In 1990 Conservative politician Norman Tebbit said in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*: 'A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?'¹⁹ This became known as the 'Tebbit test', and it served as a politically coercive challenge to minority communities to show their commitment to nation and their right to belonging here. (In fact, as Ben Carrington has observed, sport is interesting sociologically because it offers the possibility to sustain diasporic affinities simultaneously with local and national ones.²⁰) One of the things that Euro 2020 demonstrated was quite how wrong Norman Tebbit was, and the toxic nature of his 'test'. The affinity of large numbers of Black and Brown people for the England team was everywhere. The euphoric scene of British Muslims from an Islamic seminary crowding around a small laptop and celebrating Harry Kane netting an extra-time goal as England beat Denmark 2-1 answered Tebbit once and for all. Hasan Patel commented on Twitter:



Hasan Patel
@Hasanpatel

...

British Muslim students from an Islamic seminary watching the #ENG🇬🇧 game when @HKane scored. This is the #eng🇬🇧 we are part from which some people lead us to believe isn't possible, it is and the racists can do one. @Sathnam @mrjamesob you'll appreciate it.



See Hasan Patel
@Hasanpatel 8
June 2021²¹

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During England’s Euro 20 game against Ukraine, three British Muslim women (Shaista Aziz, Amna Abdullatif and Huda Jawad - #TheThreeHijabis) ‘walked in to a bar’ and began a twitter thread on inclusion and representation in football that went viral. For Shaista Aziz, the reaction to the tweet was a ‘triggering ... emotional conversation about football, Gareth Southgate’s unapologetically anti-racist, anti-homophobic England, belonging, and why representation matters’; ‘taking the knee, by standing against homophobia and bigotry, this is playing for all of us’.²² After the attacks on the three Black players, the three women set up a petition to ban racists from football for life.²³ When interviewed by *ITV News*, Abdullatif stated:

... many people have reflected on that [racism] over the years in terms of their organisations, in terms of things that might be said that they have tolerated and allowed to be said in personal company with friends at work etc. We’ve done that bit, now it’s time for action ... we need to protect these players ... this is about protecting those young men that have made us proud, they really have, they were brilliant, and I think ... it’s on us to now be supporting them, so I do hope that it will bring the necessary change so that players don’t just feel like they are constantly having to deal with the same thing over and over again.²⁴

It should also be noted that it’s no coincidence that the most diverse teams playing in the Euros were those from the former major colonial powers: England, France, Portugal, the Netherlands and Belgium. Many of the players for these countries had at least one parent or grandparent born outside the country they were representing: without such players the English team’s starting line-up against Italy in the final would have been down to just four players: Shaw, Pickford, Stones and Mount. Missing players would have included Bukayo Saka, whose parents are Nigerian, Harry Kane, whose father is Irish, Marcus Rashford, whose mother is from St Kitts and Jamaican-born Raheem Sterling. Thirteen of England’s Euro 2020 squad could have played for a different country,²⁵ and tracing the families of almost all the team reveals stories of migration.²⁶

Furthermore, in stark contrast to some of the antics we have seen from previous English football teams - including Southgate’s own Euro 96 team - this young team is all about social responsibility: Rashford’s campaigns for child poverty, Kane’s support of LGBTQ Pride during England’s match against Germany, Raheem Sterling’s

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campaign to address under-representation of Black people in government and sporting organisations, and the team's pledge to donate a significant portion of their nearly £10 million Euro 2020 fund to NHS charities. Southgate's team, and the patterns of support it inspired, signified an important shift towards the realisation of a more inclusive Englishness. This says something about the struggle taking place at the heart of England's sense of itself.

We might see the Euro 2020 tournament as a moment when the balance of social forces tipped towards an anti-racist Englishness. The numbers of people who gathered in front of the Marcus Rashford mural was evidence of that, along with the chorus of public support for England's Black players. In October 2021 Marcus Rashford told the BBC of how heartened he was by the support he had received:

It's nice to have that support from different types of people, it's something that I've probably not really experienced before, it's definitely a great feeling for me to have that support from people that ... some of them don't even watch football. Just for us as a team it was nice to see people behind us. You never want to get that far in a tournament and then get to the final game and lose, but to lose on penalties - it's such fine margins. And I've been lucky enough to take a lot of penalty kicks and know that some of them go in, some of them don't. But there's never a time that racism is acceptable, or we should accept racism and just get on with our lives. But - and probably on the biggest stage - that racism has been in front of us as young players, and it was nice to see so many people supporting us without us even saying anything.²⁷

Looking back to the publication twenty years ago of *The Changing Face of Football* we might ask what has changed? Many would say very little. For Black players the shadow of racism still makes their belonging to England contingent and revoked if they don't perform well. There has not been a profound change within the institutions of English football, which still places racism as an external problem to be found either in social media or in 'foreign' stadia.

As John Barnes pointed out during Euro 2020, the 'diversity' of the England team is not a new phenomenon, and the media fascination with it risks forgetting the long and brave history of Black players wearing the England shirt.²⁸ As Ben Carrington has pointed out, what is different now is the political confidence with which Black

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players and their white allies are speaking out publicly against racism. They no longer tolerate or accommodate racism and hypocrisy from fans - or politicians for that matter. And, we argue, the extent of the support and solidarity shown to Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho has tipped the balance towards an English solidarity that is expressed through an avowed rejection of racism. This may be temporary and uneven, but its effects will be a lasting legacy.

The empathy and tenderness shown by Southgate towards his players in defeat also portrays an alternative expression of English masculinity. Southgate knew failure himself, having missed a penalty in England’s loss to Germany in the semi-final of Euro 96. There was something deeply moving about watching Southgate console Sancho, Saka and Rashford when they too faltered from the penalty spot. The lesson here from England’s fortunes in the 2020 tournament is that in the end our shared humanity is not to be found in the arrogance of bellicose national pride, or the capacity to prevail and dominate, but rather in how we conduct ourselves in moments of failure. This is the gift that Southgate’s iconic England team has bestowed upon the nation. Southgate predicted as much prior to the tournament in his open letter to England, penned one month prior to England’s final against Italy:

... the reality is that the result is just a small part of it. When England play, there’s much more at stake than that. It’s about how we conduct ourselves on and off the pitch, how we bring people together, how we inspire and unite, how we create memories that last beyond the 90 minutes. That last beyond the summer. That last forever.²⁹

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Kelly Mills has just completed her undergraduate degree in Sociology & Criminology and is currently undertaking MSc Social Research, both at Goldsmiths, University of London. Kelly’s areas of interest are the sociology of racism, popular culture and music, policing, crime and youth studies.

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