

## Introduction

When I first heard it, it encouraged me to think of myself as whole and unhyphenated: *Afropean*. Here was a space where blackness was taking part in shaping European identity at large. It suggested the possibility of living in and with more than one idea: Africa and Europe, or, by extension, the Global South and the West, without being mixed-this, half-that or black-other. That being black in Europe didn't necessarily mean being an immigrant.

Labels are invariably problematic, often provocative, but at their best they can sing something into visibility. From my stymied vantage point – growing up in a working-class area of Sheffield ravaged by the external forces of free-market economics and the internal, protective force of local insularity that took shape in postcode wars – I began to notice a world that had been invisible to me before, or at the very least implausible; in my small corner of Britain, I had felt I was being forced to react against one culture or overidentify with the other.

Originally coined in the early 90s by David Byrne and Belgian-Congolese artist Marie Daulne, front woman of music group Zap Mama, I first encountered this notion of 'Afropean' in the realms of music and fashion. Among many others, Les Nubians, soul sisters from Chad by way of France, exuded it, as did Neneh Cherry, whose roots are Swedish and Sierra Leonean, Joy Denalane from South Africa via Germany, and Claude Grunitzky's *Trace* publication. 'Transcultural Styles and Ideas' was the magazine's tagline and reflected Grunitzky's own Afropean identity: he had a Polish grandfather on his mother's side, was born in Togo, raised in Paris and launched his magazine in London. This was a very attractive

scene I was tapping into: beautiful, talented, successful black Europeans effortlessly articulating their cultural influences in coherent and creative ways. It was particularly attractive to me because the sense was that this iteration of blackness existing in Europe appeared as if it wasn't going to be going anywhere any time soon, felt closer to home than the sometimes overbearing cultural and political language emerging out of America, and more encompassing and nuanced than the Black Britain club, whose sense of itself was starting to feel outdated, often packaged exclusively as an embodiment of the Windrush Generation.\*

Initially, then, I saw 'Afropean' as something of a utopian alternative to the doom and gloom that has surrounded the black image in Europe in recent years and an optimistic route forward. I wanted to work on a project that connected and presented Afro-Europeans as lead actors in our own story and, with all this glorious Afropean imagery in mind, I imagined this would result in some kind of coffee-table photo-book with snippets of feel-good text to accompany a series of trendy photographic portraits. There would be images of the 'success stories' of black Europe: young men and women whose street style effortlessly and elegantly articulated an empowered black European mood.

It was a visit to the 'Jungle' in Calais in 2016 that encouraged me to reconsider this approach. Over some fragrant, milky Arabic tea, Hishem, a young man from Sudan who ran one of many small, remarkably organized cafés and had been living in the Jungle for ten months, told me how he'd lost everything, had no surviving family members, had painful memories of the past and tremulous visions of the future and was stuck in this limbo land between Africa and Europe, home (a little of which he'd miraculously fashioned in his cushion-covered café) and anonymity. As I left his creaking plywood premises, he suggested that I write about his story and about life in the Jungle, a request I was nervous about. This man was intelligent,

\* In the last national census, for the first time more black Brits identified themselves as black African than Afro-Caribbean.

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articulate and literate: wouldn't it be better that he write about the Jungle himself? Maybe I could help attract attention to his writing, or publish his story on the website that I run, but what did I personally know about seeing friends massacred, fleeing war, hiding for my life in shipping containers or on ill-equipped boats in order to arrive penniless at a bunch of cold, windswept shacks in the hinterlands of northern France, apart from what he was telling me?

After exchanging contact details, I left the Jungle on my bicycle and slowly realized that I was being watched and followed through the blustery streets of Calais by the French military police, the Gendarmerie. Attempting to enter the white gates of the port to catch my ferry back to the UK, I was stopped before I could even get to passport control, searched, asked for my ID, where I was going, where I'd come from, how long I'd been away, and why. Finally, after more questioning and looks of suspicion, I was allowed to enter an official compound I'd seen other brown-skinned men of my age look longingly at from a distance. I was in; they were out.



Unlike the people I met in the Jungle, I wasn't so much living in limbo as living with liminality. I was 'in' because I had ID. I had ID because I was born and raised in England, had a history connected to Europe, knew how things ran. And yet, within this piece of geography, this idea of Europe, I was frequently reminded that I wasn't all the way in; one Remembrance Day – a day I've come to dread for the way it spikes an ugly nationalism which I sometimes find myself on the receiving end of – I was hit with that old chestnut and told 'go back to where you came from' by a middle-aged man, red-faced with rage and racism. My skin colour had disguised various facts, such as my grandfather having fought for Britain behind enemy lines in the Second World War and winning a medal for doing so. My skin had disguised my Europeanness; 'European' was still being used as a synonym for 'white'.

If 'Afropean' was something that could attempt to address this issue, I needed to find out what lay behind or beyond its brand. A brand largely black-spun and authored, yes, but that's all it was for now, a pleasant idea that was being sold to me and involved PR companies, stylists, fashion photographers and art direction. In Britain, it was this sort of vision of corporate multiculturalism, this veneer of inclusion, that Tony Blair's New Labour had used in an attempt to make Britain appear international, open-minded, forward-thinking and ready for business in the global economy, without affecting policies for long-term change in the way Britain treated its immigrants. Did Afropean include only beautiful, economically successful (and often light-skinned) black people?

'Afropean' as aspiration was one thing, but as I was writing about an interplay between black and European cultures, I realized this utopian vision of a black European experience would mean wilfully ignoring realities shared by a majority of black people living in Europe. It would mean making the numerous groups of unemployed black men I saw at train stations, or the African women cleaning toilets, or the disenfranchised communities struggling in the hinterlands of cities, completely invisible. It

also seemed disingenuous to leave out my own culturally rich – if also less glamorous – experience of growing up mixed-race in Britain, and how it felt to travel Europe as somebody who identifies as black. It became apparent that I should let the reader know where I was coming from, in order that they might better understand where I was heading, that is, the under-documented areas of Europe that often contradict the homogenized monocultured depictions suggested by tourist boards and pocket-sized travel guides. I was also travelling during a time when a ‘multicultural backlash’ suggesting that the likes of me represented some sort of failed temporary experiment was sweeping across the continent and felt it was time to regroup and reassert my own plurality as part of a larger mission to suggest how multiculturalism might work beyond the pages of a reactionary press, in the very real multiculturalism embedded in my own heritage and in the streets of European cities. ‘Afropean’ had to be more than, to paraphrase Labour MP Jon Cruddas, an obsession with an authentic search for the self, and something more like a contribution to a community, with its trade-offs and compromises. It had to build a bridge over that dividing fence that says whether you’re in or out and form some sort of informal cultural coalition.