

In Defence of The North by Ruby A Duncan

I've always felt I was in a confusing relationship with 'The North'. Being mixed race - Jamaican and Scottish- and living in a very white area that was the frustrating mix of racist and hippy/liberal, I never really considered myself 'Northern'. I didn't feel completely included in the Northern banter, friendliness and rationale that the people pride themselves on. Half of the 'banter' growing up was constructed around racist stereotypes and as I was usually the only "coloured kid" (as the athletics coach would call me) in most settings, I was not always ready to pick that fight. Therefore, 'Northern' was not part of my arsenal when describing my identity, whereas I could always say 'Scottish and Jamaican' with pride. It was only when I got to Oxford and was spending six months of every year living in the South that I felt my Northern upbringing was something that had distinctively shaped my being. Then I would find myself saying I was "from the North" and clarifying, when it was assumed: "Noooo, I'm not from North London, North England, like Yorkshire. Have you heard of Leeds and Manchester? Yeah? I'm from in between those two!" My London friends looked at me amused, to them it was alien to be from somewhere with a name not internationally known.

When the racist riots happened in the summer of 2024 I found myself cradled in a new period of deliberation over my regional identity. Feeling obliged to defend the North and simultaneously being rejected by certain pockets of it.

I was actively defending 'God's Own Country' and its people over the allegations coming from the media and seeping into daily conversations that the top of the country was filled with racist, 2-braincell-having bigots. Like these were inherent qualities of the region; our (tasty) water, the soil, and (lack of hot) weather make us bigots.

Media outlets, delayed in their reporting of the riots, suddenly burst into action when they realised they could frame working class Northern people as the poll bearers of racism, as if they were an anomaly to the rest of the British public- polite, reserved and too educated for foul-languaged-prejudice. The assumption that racism is for morons, for people with no education or manners completely ignores the very root of racism as an intentionally constructed device used globally; developed by 'scientists', politicians and media outlets; many people with many degrees. It is a part of societies internationally that divides and harms people both with grand sweeping gestures and policies as well as in sly secretive ways. Racism was not invented by the working class nor by Northerners, but the stereotypes have prevailed for both groups.

It is of course important to hold those who hurt families, community organisations and homes accountable, but we should not frame such behaviour as a regional disposition. There are many sources of blame to pursue such as anti-immigration discourse, the continued under-funding of community services, infrastructure and the continued neglect of people for the priority of profit. There is much to say on the state of racism in the UK at the moment and one would find it hard to do justice to that, but for the meantime this is my pledge of defence for the North. We have lots to boast of including Greggs and drinkable tap water. Our people are nice too. Racism, of course racism exists in the North, I grew up with it, I saw it violently manifest during this summer, but racism is not an inherently Northern thing, nor are we the forefathers of its power. The UK needs greater self-awareness in conversations to do with racism, class and prejudice so we can achieve actual change. Shoddy regional scapegoating won't suffice.

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