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Born 1985. Associate Professor of Sociology.
Autobiographical life story.

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The first five chapters of this life story are a transcript, archived here with acknowledgement and thanks, of a BBC Radio 4 talk by Jason Arday in the Lent Talks series. It was broadcast on 20th March 2021.

1. Early Years

This is a story of hope. It's a story about a kind who was born deaf in one ear, couldn't speak until he was eleven, grew up on a poor housing estate, endured racial discrimination on the streets, and at the age of 33 became a professor at an elite university. It's my story.

Music has been a central part of my life. I was born with a form of autism called global developmental delay. Which meant I signed until I was eleven, and only learned to read and write when I was eighteen. Music was a really big part of how I constructed ideas about the world. Songs like Joe Cocker's version of 'With a Little Help from my Friends', 'Believe' by Lenny Kravitz, and 'Don't Stop' by Fleetwood Mac, became really important to me. Because of the ideas around friendship, self-belief, and believing that with any new day everything is possible.



The band Fleetwood Mac.

Generally speaking, when you think of academics, they tend to be people who got straight As in school, who went along the conveyor belt from GCSE to A-level, to university, to multiple postgraduate degrees. When I was eighteen the height of my ambition was to spell my name. I've been reflecting on how I got from that point to where I am now. It's about the people and the support structures around me that have enabled me to see the bigger picture. Some might also call it a divine plan.

Music framed my experience of the world as a kid. But the journey I have been on since would not have been possible without a belief in God, and people who believed in me. They were able to look beyond my immediate setbacks and encourage me to think big. My Mum, who never made me

feel different, Debbie, who taught me how to read, and my academic tutor Sandra who texted me every day to tell me that I could achieve great things.

2. First Words, Football and Snooker

After years of speech therapy, I remember my first words at the age of eleven - 'Hello, my name is Jason'. It was a euphoric moment, because I hadn't heard my own voice before. I had been locked in since I was born and all of a sudden my inner voice became my own voice. But I never felt disadvantaged, because there was a beauty in not being able to talk. It allowed me to use other senses, and when I finally could talk it gave me a unique perspective on the world. It served me really well throughout the course of my life.

It could have been very different for me. My Mum got me into two things: football and snooker. She instinctively knew that if I channelled my tendency for obsession and repetition into constructive activities it would help me in the long run. It turns out I did quite well. Having been a youth player at a professional football club and on the verge of turning professional at snooker. But for my Mum, that was just a bonus. She saw the bigger picture. She wanted me to use the discipline I had shown to build confidence and apply it to other things. As my experience with the world changed after learning to speak, so did my social awareness. Racism became an issue in my teens. Growing up on a really tough Council estate, my parents gave me the talk about the police very early on. I experienced my first stop and search at the age of fourteen. A lot of the people I grew up with are dead or in prison. I saw people shot, stabbed, and killed. I grew up very quickly. I remember a drug dealer telling me to keep my head in my books and my cue in my hand. Nine months later that drug dealer was murdered. Even though I couldn't read at the time, it became a poignant piece of advice, which I followed.

You don't really learn a lot about yourself when things are going well. It's the disappointments that you learn from. My Mum told me that I was the child that gave her the most grief, but also the most pleasure. There is somewhere better beyond the immediate place of setback and suffering, even though it might not feel like that at the time.

3. Faith

The story of Jesus' death and resurrection changed the world and is the essence of Christian hope. But he was having some serious second thoughts in the Garden of Gethsemane. He cried out in existential agony to God: 'My Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me. Yet not what I want, what you want'. He afraid of what he is about to face, but he submits his will to a bigger plan, a bigger picture. Having hope in a bigger picture is a powerful thing. But it is only as powerful as the faith, religious or otherwise, that underpins it.

My own outlook on life has very much been shaped by a belief that a greater power has created my hopes, dreams, fears and aspirations, and brought them all to fruition. For me personally, hope has been a strong tenet in my life, particularly when I think about how I navigate difficulty. My faith very much guides me in the mantra that no two days are the same and that hope can always be found in a new day.

As with any human being who walks in faith, there have been times when I have questioned the presence of God, particularly in darker moments when challenges have seemed insurmountable. Even Jesus had these moments. On the cross, he cried: ' My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'. I am continuously reminded that the fact that I am still here, and able to see a new dawn, is testament enough that God is omnipresent in everything that I do. And I knew that giving something back was also part of the plan.

4. University

When I was eighteen I did some relief work in a homeless shelter. I met a professor who had lost his family in a road accident and became destitute. After speaking to him, it made me realise what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to help as many people as I could. Someone once said to me: 'You can measure intelligence, but you can't measure the will to succeed'. I knew that the latter was within my control. I had two ambitions: to raise a million pounds for charity, and to get a PhD.

I had a roller coaster decade in my twenties. Two years after learning to read and write I went to university. The skills I had developed from playing snooker lent themselves to academia. I was obsessive and disciplined. I graduated, and completed my first Master's when I was 25. The next year I completed thirty marathons in thirty five days for a homeless charity and for a children's hospice. At 26 I got my second Master's while completing 300 miles in three days on a treadmill for charity. The following year I ran with the Olympic torch and completed 500 miles from Edinburgh to London in six days. By the time I was thirty I got my PhD, and I reached a million pounds raised for charity.

All of my life I have always been the proverbial underdog. And it's actually a position I've been comfortable with in a way, because it comes with no expectation. This has always somewhat placed me in a 'nothing to lose' situation. There is a sense of comfort and assuredness that I have always resided in, knowing that God's presence in my life is unwavering. Despite my own turbulent relationship with God, where sometimes I have felt alone in the world, as all human beings will sometimes feel, at varying intermittent stages of their life. I am often reminded in my slumber, or when list in thought, of how different my life may have been, if not for a feeling that God's presence has converted the most unfavourable odds into my favour when I most needed it.

There are several testimonies I could personally draw on. After completing my PhD I was diagnosed with two brain tumours which thankfully turned out to be benign. But I want to share one experience which brings my story more or less up to date.

5. A Crucial Interview



I found myself in a position in April 2019 interviewing for an academic position at an elite university. This had seemed so unlikely after some of the desperate situations I had come from. This moment was a seminal one in my adult life. One of the things my faith had taught me was to learn to accept things with grace. In other words, when things did not go my way, take this with good grace. And when things did go my way take this with good grace. This was my Mum's take on the Serenity Prayer, something I had often taken great guidance from. 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Having applied for several jobs at elite universities, and often falling short because of many systems in place which might often disadvantage someone like me, I had to draw on my ability to be gracious in disappointment, and believe in the bigger picture. Believe that God's time was the right time, yet not what I want but what you want. This was something that at times frustrated me and made me question whether my prayers were falling on deaf ears. Such is the impatience of human beings. April 2019 represented for me personally, after a long and hard road, my final opportunity to fulfil my ambition of gaining employment at an elite university. The sense of pressure was deafening, and was compounded by the fact that I was petrified at the thought of falling at the final hurdle again. Specially as this was the best opportunity I had been given to realise my dream, given the prestige of the institution.

Before my interview, I felt an overwhelming sense of fear. Perhaps the fear of coming up short again, or not being able to perform in the cauldron of pressure particularly felt in interviews for academic positions in

universities - particularly for academics of colour. Had I not dared to hope in the first place I would not even have tried. And had those around me not believed in me I would not have been in the interview room.

Before I entered the room I had asked God to provide me with courage and fearlessness. I was paralysed by fear. Fear of what it could mean for me personally, professionally and mentally if another opportunity had somehow evaded my grasp. As I was asked to enter the interview room, the weight of fear and pressure that had paralysed me instantaneously disappeared. As I responded to questions calmly, diligently and with confidence. I would receive a phone call a day or two later to be informed that I had finally realised my professional ambition. I had secured a job at an elite university and had managed to do so at one of the most prestigious universities in the world - Durham University.

When I was eighteen the height of my ambition was to spell my name. Through faith and encouragement I managed to achieve the impossible. Now as an Associate Professor and Deputy Executive Dean, I hold a position of responsibility to help disadvantaged students look beyond the constraints imposed on them by themselves and others.



The band AC/DC.

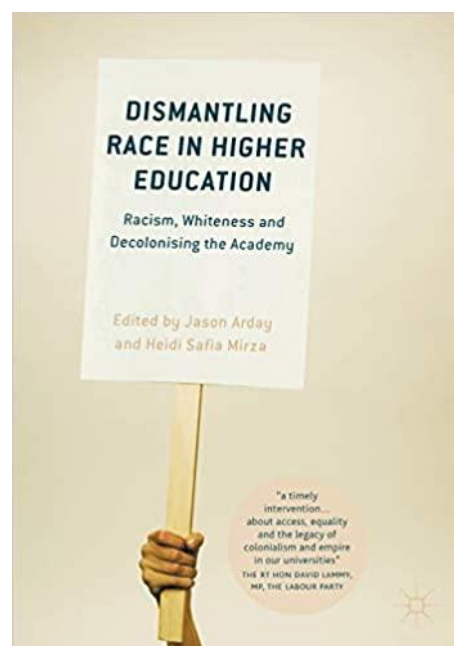
In the words of AC/DC, which have become something of a mantra to me, 'It's a long way to the top if you want to rock and roll'. My ability to be eternally hopeful, and to believe that everything is possible, comes from a belief that no two days are the same and with tomorrow comes an opportunity to embrace adversity and to find a way to turn a negative into a positive. There is always a bigger picture.

6. Books

Three books written or edited by Jason Arday are described by their publishers below.

Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy. By Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza. Published in 2018.

This book reveals the roots of structural racism that limit social mobility and equality within Britain for Black and ethnicised students and academics in its inherently white Higher Education institutions. It brings together both established and emerging scholars in the fields of Race and Education to explore what institutional racism in British Higher Education looks like in colour-blind 'post-race' times, when racism is deemed to be 'off the political agenda'. Keeping pace with our rapidly changing global universities, this edited collection asks difficult and challenging questions, including why black academics leave the system; why the curriculum is still white; how elite universities reproduce race privilege; and how Black, Muslim and Gypsy traveller students are disadvantaged and excluded.

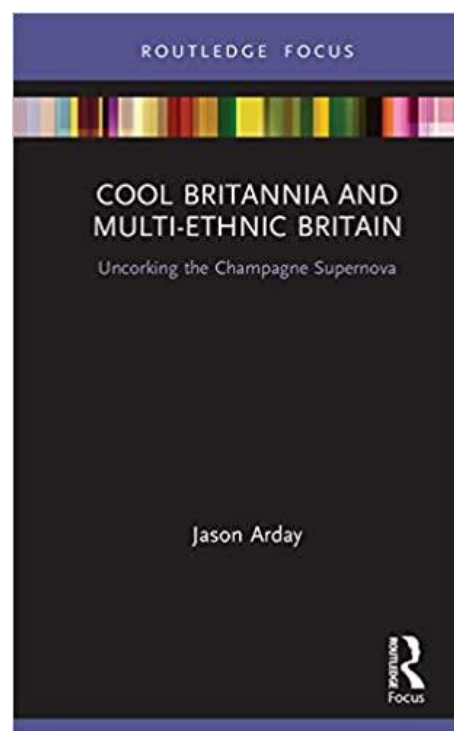


The book also discusses why British racial equality legislation has failed to address racism, and explores what the Black student movement is doing about this. As the authors powerfully argue, it is only by dismantling the invisible architecture of post-colonial white privilege that the 21st century struggle for a truly decolonised academy can begin. This collection will be essential reading for students and academics working in the fields of Education, Sociology, and Race.

Cool Britannia and Multi-Ethnic Britain: Uncorking the Champagne Supernova. By Jason Arday. Published in 2019.

Cool Britannia and Multi-Ethnic Britain: Uncorking the Champagne Supernova attempts to move away from the melancholia of Cool Britannia and the discourse which often encases the period by repositioning this phenomenon through an ethnic minority perspective.

In March 1997, the front page of the magazine *Vanity Fair* announced ‘London Swings! Again!’ This headline was a direct reference to the swinging London of the 1960s – the English capital which became the era-defining epicentre of the world for its burgeoning rock and pop music scene, with its daring new youth culture, and the boutique fashion houses of Carnaby Street captured most indelibly by the Mods, Rockers, and psychedelic hippies of the time. In the 1990s this renewed interest in the swinging 60s seemed to reinvigorate popular culture, after a global period in the 1980s which would see the collapse of traditional communism and the ending of Cold War, while ushering in the beginnings of a new technological age spearheaded by Apple, Microsoft, and IBM. The dawn of the 1990s meant that peace and love would once again reign supreme, with Britannia being at the forefront of ‘cool’ again. Godfathers of the Mancunian Rock scene New Order would declare ‘Love had the world in motion’ and, for a fleeting period, Britain was about to encounter its second coming as the cultural epicentre of the world.



Although history proffers a period of utopia, inclusion, and cultural integration, the narrative alters considerably when exploring this euphoric period through a discriminatory and racialised lens. This book repositions the ethnic minority–lived experience during the 1990s from the societal and political margins to the centre. The lexicon explored here attempts to provide an altogether different discourse that allows us to reflect on seminal and racially discriminatory episodes during the 1990s that subsequently illuminated the systemic racism sustained by the state. The Cool Britannia years become a metaphoric reference point for presenting a Britain that was culturally splintered in many ways. This book utilises storytelling and auto-ethnography as an instrument to unpack the historical amnesia that ensues when unpacking the racialised plights of the time.

Doing Equity and Diversity for Success in Higher Education: Redressing Structural Inequalities in the Academy (Palgrave Studies in Race, Inequality and Social Justice in Education). By Dave S. P. Thomas (Editor), Jason Arday (Editor). Published in 2021.

This book provides a forensic and collective examination of pre-existing understandings of structural inequalities in Higher Education Institutions. Going beyond the current understandings of causal factors that promote inequality, the editors and contributors illuminate the dynamic interplay between historical events and discourse and more sophisticated and racialized acts of violence.

In doing so, the book crystallises myriad contemporary manifestations of structural racism in higher education. Amidst an upsurge in racialized violence, civil unrest, and barriers to attainment, progression and success for students and staff of colour, doing equity and diversity for success in higher education has become both politically urgent and morally imperative. This book calls for a redistribution of power across intersectional and racial lines as a means of decentering whiteness and redressing structural inequalities in the academy. It is essential reading for scholars of sociology and education, as well as those interested in equality and social justice.

