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Introduction

When I won the Booker Prize in 2019 for my novel *Girl, Woman, Other*, I became an 'overnight success' – after forty years working professionally in the arts. My career hadn't been without its achievements and recognition, but I wasn't widely known. The novel became a #1 bestseller sold in many foreign languages and received the kind of attention I had long desired for my work. In countless interviews, I found myself discussing my route to reaching this high point after so long. I said I felt unstoppable, because it struck me that I had been just this, ever since I left my family home at eighteen to make my own way in the world.

I reflected that my creativity could be traced back to my early years, cultural background and the influences that have shaped my life. Most people in the arts have role models – writers, artists, creatives – who have inspired them, but what are the other elements that lay the foundations for our creativity and steer the direction of our careers? This book is my answer to this question for myself, offering insights into my heritage and childhood, my lifestyle and relationships, the origins and nature of my creativity, and my personal development strategies and activism.

For those who have only encountered my writing at this newly elevated point of arrival, this book reveals what it took to keep going and growing; and for those who have been struggling for a long time, who might recognize their stories in mine, I hope you

find it inspirational as you travel along your own paths towards achieving your ambitions.

So here it is – *Manifesto*: *On Never Giving Up*: a memoir and a meditation on my life.

One

ān (Old English)
ẹni (Yoruba)
a haon (Irish)
ein (German)
um (Portuguese)

heritage, childhood, family, origins

As a race, the human one, we all carry our histories of ancestry within us, and I am curious as to how mine helped determine the person and writer I became. I know that I come from generations of people who migrated from one country to another in order to make a better life for themselves, people who married across the artificial constructions of borders and the manmade barriers of culture and race.

My English mother met my Nigerian father at a Commonwealth dance in central London in 1954. She was studying to be a teacher at a Catholic teacher-training college run by nuns in Kensington; he was training to be a welder. They married and had eight children in ten years. Growing up, I was labelled 'half-caste', the term for bi-racial people at that time. Like all these categories – Negro, coloured, black, mixed-race, bi-racial, of colour – they function as accepted descriptors until they are replaced. We now understand that race doesn't actually exist – it is not a biological fact – and humans share all but 1 per cent of our DNA. Our differences are not scientific but due to other factors such as the environment. But race is a lived experience, therefore it is enormously consequential. Understanding the fiction of race doesn't mean that we can dispense with the categories, not yet.

The concept of 'black British' was considered a contradiction in terms during my childhood. Brits didn't recognize people of colour as fellow citizens, and they in turn often aligned themselves with

their countries of origin. I never had a choice but to consider myself British. This was the country of my birth, my life, even if it was made clear to me that I didn't really belong because I wasn't white. Yet Nigeria was a faraway concept, a country where my father had originated, about which I knew nothing.

I know a lot more about my mother's side of the family than I do my father's. Not so long ago I discovered that my roots in Britain stretch back over three hundred years to 1703. It would have been helpful to know this as a child because I would have had a stronger sense of belonging, and it would have provided me with ammunition against those who told me, and every other person of colour of the time, to go back to where we came from.

It's not that one has to have British roots to belong here, and the notion that you only belong if you do should always be challenged. The rights of citizenship are not restricted to birth rights, and the water has always been muddied by those who were considered 'subjects' of the British Empire, but who were not anointed with 'citizenship'.

I know that DNA testing is controversial, as different services produce varying results based on their research pools, but I nonetheless find it fascinating. My Ancestry DNA test, which goes back eight generations, reveals an ethnicity estimate that describes my roots thus: 'Nigeria: 38 per cent; Togo: 12 per cent; England, northwestern Europe: 25 per cent; Scotland: 14 per cent; Ireland: 7 per cent; Norway: 4 per cent'. (The two countries I can't tie in with known ancestors are Scotland and Norway.)

Yet, while I am equally black and white in terms of ancestry, when people look at me, they see my father through me, and not my mother. The fact that I cannot claim a white identity, should I so wish (not that I do), is intrinsically irrational, and serves only to demonstrate the point that the idea of race is absurd.

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I was born in 1959 in Eltham and raised in Woolwich, both in south London. As someone who was female, working class and a person of colour, limitations had been determined for me before I even opened my mouth to cry at the shock of being thrust out of my mother's cosy amniotic womb, where I had spent nine months in dreamily sensate harmony with my creator. My future was not propitious – I was destined to be regarded as a sub-person: submissive, inferior, marginal, negligible – a bona fide subaltern.

At the time of my birth there were only fourteen women members of the British Parliament compared to 630 men, which meant that 97 per cent of those who controlled the country were male. Our society was therefore patriarchal. This is not an opinion, but a fact. Women's voices and specific concerns around motherhood, marriage, employment and sexual and reproductive freedom were rarely heard at policy level, nor were there many women in positions of prominence, leadership or power anywhere else in the nation. Today, around a third of British MPs are women.

A year after my birth the Pill afforded women the freedom to have more control over what they did with their bodies, but it was another sixteen years before, in 1975, the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts made it illegal to discriminate against women.

It's safe to surmise that I inherited a history of women's secondary status in society. My mother, born in 1933, had been raised in the tradition of women of the time to be subservient to the husband she would one day marry, to accommodate his needs before hers. She was indeed obedient to the social mores that required her to defer to my father's authority, until Second Wave Feminism in the seventies began to challenge and shift societal attitudes, whereupon she started to assert herself, taking inspiration from her four teenage daughters

who were coming of age in more liberating times. She finally gained independence from my father after thirty-three years of marriage.

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Through my father, a Nigerian immigrant who had sailed into the Motherland on the 'Good Ship Empire' in 1949, I inherited a skin colour that defined how I was perceived in the country into which I was born, that is, as a foreigner, outsider, alien. At the time of my birth it was also still legal to discriminate against people based on the colour of their skin, and it would be many years before the Race Relations Acts enshrined the full scope of anti-racist doctrine into British law, from its first iteration in 1965 when racism in public became illegal, through to 1976, when the law finally became more comprehensive.

When my father arrived in this country, another myth abounded – the inferiority of Africans as savages, which had been circulating since the beginning of the imperial project and the transatlantic slave trade. He came from a territory that had been subject to colonial encroachment and conquest for nearly a century. The British Empire tried to perpetuate the myth that it was civilizing barbarous cultures, when in reality it was a hugely profitable capitalistic venture.

While the post-war *Windrush* Caribbean era of arrival has been well documented and explored, the equivalent African narratives have not. There were, however, many similarities. The moment my father arrived in Britain as a young man, he was brutally stripped of his self-image as an individual and had to assume an imposed identity – as the visual embodiment of centuries of negative misrepresentation. Britain was recruiting people from the colonies to fill the gaps due to casualties in the Second World War. My father had duly travelled from his homeland, where he was just another human