

RACIST TONES



Image: Paul Chokran

Racist Tones foregrounds the everyday stories of those at the receiving end of the hostile racist environment, which formed the backdrop to the Two-Tone record label founded in 1979 in Coventry. It delves into the tones and frequencies in which racism was received and lived in this period.

Racist Tones has been distinctively compiled from two modes of storytelling, altering how we imagine places across time in Coventry

During the 2021 lockdown, four of us came together online to write our flashbacks of racism from when we were growing up in Coventry, in the seventies and eighties, leading us to form the FOUR WRITERS group. This prompted us to start a dialogue with other people in our kinship networks. These conversations have only just begun...

YOU CAN WRITE or START CONVERSATIONS FROM THE PROMPTS WE USED:

1. AT THE WINDOWS,
2. WHEN I SAW A SKINHEAD
3. DEMONSTRATING
4. SPAT AT
5. ON THE STREETS
6. WHERE WE DIDN'T GO
7. ON MATCH DAY
8. THEY CALLED YOU 'P*KI' TO MAKE YOU FEEL
9. PUBS
10. YOU ARE ONE OF US
11. I AM NOT ONE OF YOU
12. YES MY MUM WORE

PROMPT: THEY CALLED YOU 'P*KI' TO MAKE YOU FEEL

They called you 'P*ki' to make you feel dirty and small. I had walked into town. I must have been 14, going to Superdrug to buy some makeup. It was outside where Woolworths was, and the day was bright. Town was bustling with shoppers and all I had done was glance or maybe not even that. I think he just shouted it; he was a young white adolescent with his friends. I think I momentarily stopped in my tracks, surprised at this encounter.

I must have heard this taunt when I was younger but coming from a mixed school in Hillfield's, I had learned 'P*ki' meant pure and already noticed that the swastikas they adorned themselves with were taken from the Hindu religion.

The word 'P*ki' had stopped being anything of self-loathing, it did ring in my ears, that adrenaline rush to

carry on walking to get away. To not cower or run home and head to my destination made me feel angry and hurt. But through this feeling it made me realise that the ignorant showed their true colours of not knowing anything and with that I went to buy my blue eyeliner and black mascara. (Tarla Patel)

PROMPT: WHERE WE DID NOT GO

We didn't walk past a pub if we could avoid it, because those were the places where racists stirred up and emboldened with alcohol could attack.

I didn't go to the youth club disco, because the first and only time I did someone said that 'the Paki's had arrived.'

We were allowed to go to the school disco. I wanted to join in, I wanted to get dressed up and dance, it never felt really safe, I was never quite sure if someone was going to be cruel or not.

We went into the city centre, shopping on Stoney Stanton Road or Foleshill Road, to visit family in the city. We went to Memorial Park, we went to the Indian Cinema, the Ritz or The Palladium. We never went to the theatre, or an art gallery; we never went to restaurants, we never went on holiday, just day trips with a huge crowd of family, there's safety in numbers.

I am often the only brown face in a theatre audience, visiting a gallery or sitting in a seaside pub, we learnt as children that these were not places for us, and when I see the look on other peoples faces I think maybe they still aren't. (Daksha Piparia)

PROMPT: DEMONSTRATING

I recall as a child it being normal for children who were not your friends calling out names, 'W*g/P*ki', 'Go back to where you came from!' from across the street, or someone telling you to get off the swing in the local park. At times there would be a reaction, other times it was accepted, and you would walk past whoever said it. It was accepted, but that did not mean that it didn't affect me, us.

I had friends who were born here in Coventry, just the same as me. They were our neighbours, our friends. We all went to school together, we all played games together in the street. They came to our house and ate food with us. Their parents were from Ireland, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

They weren't called names. They weren't told to go back to wherever they came from! They were not asked 'So, where do you come from?' My answer, even as a child, was 'Gulson Road Hospital!' and as always, 'No, where do you originally come from?' (Jitey Samra)

PROMPT: ON MATCH DAY

On Saturday, I would be driving back from playing football with the Asian team, when the City match was finishing. I would only be a few minutes from reaching home. It was very very slow-moving traffic, with the fans coming from Swan Lane and King Richard Street. I would be sitting in the car and so frightened in those ten minutes or so. I would always be hoping I would not come across a gang, especially from another town. Even if they were from our hometown, you were still scared of them.

I once saw them turn over a car on Swan Lane, near the football ground, and the man was still in the car. My car would not protect me, it had a fabric roof that could be cut open. Or they could just walk all over it.

Upon seeing a group of skinheads shouting and walking towards me, I can remember closing my eyes, hoping they would not see me and notice I was an Asian. I just wanted to be invisible, that's how scared I was. (Tari)

PROMPT: WHEN I SAW A SKINHEAD

As I approached the slope towards the subway, I could hear their laughter and hate mixing into the joy of beating up a 'P*ki'. They thrived on seeing the fear in your face. I mustn't show my fear; they hated you more if you were weak. At the same time, they wanted to crush you, out of the soil, out of the land of Rule Britannia.

Perhaps they would forego me as I was only a girl, a slight teenager. I gauged they could be too caught up in revelling with each other to need me as entertainment hate bait. Wanting to become a shadow on the oblong concrete paving stones, I turned around and walked away from them speedily.

Without eyes in the back of my long ponytailed black hair, I had no idea what they would do. Still, I did not risk running, in case their 'P*ki-bashing' game would switch on if I ran. (Nirmal Puwar)

"Racist Tones is an extraordinary book that recounts and bears witness to hateful frequencies of white violence in Coventry during the seventies and eighties. It documents the experience of the people who bore the social and emotional costs that led to the exhilarating fugitive Two-Tone sounds of *The Specials* and the unruly defiant power of Rock Against Racism. A book that should be read urgently and celebrated at full volume."

- Prof. Les Back, Goldsmiths, University of London. Author of *The Art of Listening* (2007).

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Herbert
Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

Racist Tones is a limited edition book, available to buy at the Herbert. Proceeds from the sales support creative anti-racist collaborations.



Image: Tarla Patel