

Countering Racist Bullying

Paper 6: What was there to say?

... On one of those trips with black youth groups, I went to the seaside in Brighton. I was about twelve. I was sitting on my own by a window, reading a book, when the coach stopped at the traffic lights on the front not far from the pier. It was hot, the sort of unlikely heat that descends on British shores only two or three times a year. The beach, like the roads, was gridlocked with underdressed sunseekers, their skin red raw from overexposure.

On the other side of the road about six skinheads – shaved scalps, bleached jeans at half mast, thin Lonsdale T-shirts and eighteen hole Doctor Marten boots – were walking in the opposite direction carrying cans of cheap beer, laughing and shouting at each other, when one of them spotted us, a bus full of black kids aged roughly between eight and fourteen, dressed up for a day out (we always had to put on our best clothes for these trips) and stuck on a red light [...]

The first one to see us had difficulty containing his excitement [...] I shifted over to the aisle seat to look down the centre of the coach and see if the grown-ups had noticed them. They had. When I sat back by the window they were already on their way. By the time they reached the middle of the road they had started chanting. 'Nigger ... Nigger ... Nigger, Nigger, Nigger.'

Now the whole bus knew what was going on. Everybody had moved over to my side to see what was happening. The grown-ups at the front of the bus were striding to the back, telling everyone to return to their original seats. But rushing up the aisle, bringing their panicky voices with them, just made everything worse. Within seconds the crowd on the bus had gone from the boisterous kids about to get dropped off at the seaside to a bustling, yelling house of panic on four wheels. The smaller children were starting to scream.

Meanwhile the skinheads were weaving through the stationary traffic, chanting as they strode. 'Nigger ... Nigger ... Nigger, Nigger, Nigger.' The light had just turned green, but we couldn't move because there were still cars in front of us. Still sitting by the window, I was immobilised, partly transfixed by the drama and partly fazed by the unreality. I saw the frozen glare of resentment in the eyes of the motorists around us who feared they were about to get caught up in something that they felt did not concern them.

The skinheads were upon us, bashing on the window, shouting 'Nigger!' and trying to rock the coach. The look on their faces was not one of hate but sport. We felt terrified and they were enjoying themselves [...]

After that it was never mentioned again. What was there to say, and who would you say it to anyway?