‘... We Got To Get Over Before We Go Under ...’
FRAGMENTS FOR A HISTORY OF BLACK VERNACULAR NEOLIBERALISM

Paul Gilroy

Abstract Through a discussion of Robert Kiyosaki’s Rich Dad Poor Dad books, the motivational primers of Robert Greene and other similar material produced in the UK by a legion black nationalists turned consultants, trainers, mentors and motivators, this paper asks some difficult questions about the relationship between black and migrant communities and the neoliberal thetics of uplift, self-responsibility and self-improvement. These topics have a long history that spans the interest of nineteenth-century African Americans in Samuel Smiles and the hustling ethic affirmed in several generations of Hip hop.

Keywords self-help, neoliberalism, Robert Kiyosaki, Robert Greene, Black nationalism, Black politics, Hip hop, Samuel Smiles, African American culture

In a culture where neo-liberal ideas represent a widely-circulating current, the free, ubiquitous and all-encompassing character of ‘wealth’ is a dominant theme. This is increasingly money in its naked, materialistic ‘Americanised’ form – shorn of the old, deferential, aristocratic, upper-class connotations and moral liberal reservations which have accompanied - and inflected - it in the British context.

Stuart Hall

The cultural revolution wrought by neoliberalism is altering the symbolic currency of racial difference. In 2005, Tim Campbell, a young British man of Caribbean heritage, won the first series of the UK version of the US business reality TV show, The Apprentice. The series celebrates business and management by dramatising the intense competition between contending wannabe executives. Predictably, the winner takes all and is rewarded with a chance to operate at a high level in the corporate world under the patronage of the business leader who runs the show. The losers are consigned back to the groaning pit of insecurity. It is not too crude to describe this television franchise as a weekly parable supporting the liturgy of neoliberalism: marketisation and privatisation secured by the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills.

After his historic triumph, Campbell rapidly became the poster-boy for what was then spoken of as a rising tide of interest in entrepreneurship among Britain’s ‘minority ethnic’ communities - a possibility which dovetailed readily with the ideology of New Labour as well as the broader, timely architecture of what Anthony Barnett has dubbed their ‘corporate populism’. It was no surprise that Campbell was taken up widely as a wholesome, ‘role model’ whose winning smile and evident graciousness could, for example, be projected vividly into the imaginations of disoriented young people who were being invited, through innovative, business-friendly,
secondary-school curricula, to follow in his footsteps towards the distant, glittering citadel of personal and financial success. It was not so much that wealth would descend upon anyone following that primrose path towards a classless society - though it surely would - but rather that their journey to that elusive, golden goal would be properly organised and overseen along neoliberal lines. Newly-fluent in what Alistair Beaton has described as ‘management bollocks’, Britain’s emergent legion of project managers would metaphorically don their hi-viz jackets and steward these excursions, ensuring that they would be done the right way: by harnessing individual self-realisation to the imperatives of a business culture that culminated in the revelatory manifestation of a revised hierarchy. A freshly diversified synod of generic, MBA-ed business-leaders, no longer just a gaggle of old white men, would stand proudly at the summit of achievement and invest the results of this neoliberal revolution with all the force of inevitable nature.

That well-tailored image of avowedly meritocratic, corporate diversity corresponds closely to the chapter of neoliberal transformation that has been entitled ‘The Age of Obama’. It endows the project of globalisation, conceived as a process of ‘Americanisation’, with polychromatic, heterocultural vitality. Proof that US business culture is somehow ahead of Britain’s local version can be discovered in the former’s apparent preparedness to divest itself of white supremacism. Even if racism remains intractable elsewhere, it seems that neoliberal capitalism is ready to free itself from the fetters placed upon it by the historic commitment to pigmentocracy. Multiculturalism may have been pronounced dead by mere politicians but its sovereign authority has been usurped by the expanding cohorts of diversity management.

As well as running his own charity (‘The Bright Ideas Trust’ tasked with the empowerment of ethnic minority entrepreneurs), Tim Campbell became a stalwart of the Department of Work and Pensions Ethnic Minority Advisory group. He was a Cabinet Office Social Enterprise Ambassador and a Child Ambassador for London. In the 2012 New Year Honours List, he was finally rewarded with an MBE for his ‘services to Enterprise Culture’. These serial triumphs provide a useful historical marker because they convey the evolving significance of racial difference in the core of a corporate operation that is disposed to invest strongly in the trappings of diversity and plurality. This has been done not only in order to secure access to new markets, clients and capital but also to communicate something potent and novel about the great managerial revolution that had begun to touch and to change all of Britain’s institutions, reforming their language and altering their grasp of their own mission as well as their understanding of the contending forms of value that were bound up in their practice before cuts and austerity specified new general rules. It is not possible to disassociate these historic developments from the entrenchment of the neoliberal habits and styles of thought that operate spontaneously as a kind of common sense and institutionally as a mode of governmentality.

Several issues are knotted here. A problem of periodisation is introduced into the genealogies of liberalism and neoliberalism. It raises difficult questions about exactly when specifically neoliberal themes entered into a dispersed but nonetheless popular enthusiasm for capitalist commerce, business and privatisation. Answering them is no simple matter and Mark Fisher has been insightful in seeing the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism as a key to the functioning of this contemporary assemblage which is too volatile to be described straightforwardly as the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony. Indeed, the idea of hegemony
might itself need to be revised to take a number of recent developments into account. Overdeveloped capitalism’s market state promotes cultural and technological matrices that represent a qualitative change in the relationship between information and power. Agnotological formations result from the saturation of civil society with public relations messages. Manufactured - groomed - ignorance is complemented by the expanding bio-political dynamics of psychopharmacological societies which are shaping novel varieties of selfhood. Attention deficit becomes a social phenomenon when headsets disrupt listening, eyes are focused more easily on phone screens than on faces, and the prospect of controlling one’s own technocultural bubble defines the limits of freedom for a society that is being drained of imagination. On one side, a revised history of the information order that characterised twentieth-century fascism and authoritarian populism and, on the other, a torrent of prescriptions for anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication, can help to explain how fluctuating demotic support for neoliberal perspectives has been reproduced. It is evident even among the lowest strata of Britain’s evolving racial order. Among those working and non-working non-classes, populist politics has repeatedly been articulated as misoxeny, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. Mediated by the power of News International and the scrupulously balanced commentaries supplied by overpaid BBC info-warriors, that structure of feeling has often been voiced by precarious and vulnerable people who might be thought to have little to gain from the hyper-individuation, marketisation and business-centred view of social life that the neoliberal mentality requires and generates.

An additional difficulty can be identified as the result of the successful processes of assimilation and integration that were built upon the seemingly organic political conservativism of many settler migrants and their locally-born descendants. This taboo subject is less significant electorally than it is in the wider political culture where it has helped to cement the idea that racism no longer presents a significant obstacle to individual success. Without that anachronistic distortion, we become masters and mistresses of our own fate. The lives of B-list celebrity figures such as Thatcherite footballer turned TV personality Ian Wright, and bipolar former heavy-weight boxer Frank Bruno, yield paradigmatic instances. Thinking about the ominous political trajectory of those sporting icons, perhaps to the accompaniment of John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’ in the somewhat amended form in which it was sung at the 1983 Conservative Party election rally by the Jamaican-born Hot Chocolate front-man, Errol Brown MBE, raises still more disquieting possibilities. It is not just that the atypical heroism associated with sporting triumph or, in Bruno’s case, with failure and mental illness, functions as a symbol for success in other more mundane fields of everyday life and commerce. The particular forms of postcolonial celebrity that become visible under the existential glare of the military-entertainment complex are also imagined to represent and even to embody the valour, tenacity and intelligence that characterise the exercise of ‘leadership’ skills. The same ‘skill-set’ builds character and communicates positively on the sports-field, in the boxing-ring and in the boardroom alike. How that motivational magic can be shared is a mystery known only to an elite cast of after-dinner speakers but its contemporary potency is scarcely in doubt. Sport, like the military experiences upon which it so regularly signifies, is thought to provide a means to instil uniquely desirable qualities. However, it has also been used to generate a large mirror in which the division of the neoliberal world into a new configuration - the two great tribes of winners and losers - can be glimpsed and made legitimate.
The spectacular, multicultural triumph of ‘Team GB’ at the London Olympic games of 2012 provides further support for this heuristic judgement. Signifiers of diversity were instrumental in securing that golden panoply of merited success. The value of multiculture to Britain’s geopolitical ‘branding’ aside, the elated worship of winners as the redemption of a recently riot-torn country augmented the neoliberal fantasy that anything can be achieved if the correct disposition has been adopted. It need not be repeated that these days, if individuals fail to take advantage of opportunities to free or improve themselves, then the fault is all their own. After his second triumph, no less of an authority than double gold-medal winner Mohammed ‘Mo’ Farrah CBE, confirmed the timely message that ‘it is all about grafting’. This cruel proposition chimes loudly with the buried histories of working class and immigrant Conservatism. It sanctions the ideology of hustling, and getting by - by any means necessary - and summons up the disquieting prospect of today’s black and multi-culti Britons not exactly as ideal, neoliberal subjects but as people whose testing life experiences can increase their vulnerability to the seductions of a vernacular neoliberalism. The dreams of uplift, security and possibility, the prospect of hope in a better future secured through consistently hard yet always ennobling labour, are gathered into the familiar neoliberal concept of ‘aspiration’. The idea that anyone can be helped by government to change themselves and thereby to alter their life chances by the sheer, dedicated force of their own will, is now fundamental to the legitimacy of neoliberal reform and the notions of merit that it still seems to need. My unpopular point is that this politics operates very powerfully, and often unrecognised, when it appears in blackface. As with previous varieties of popular racial drama, the principal audience for these performances is often located some distance away from the vital, unruly multicultural communities in which black and other minority Britons dwell and sometimes even thrive.

THE NEW VICTORIANS?

In a world where History is disaggregated into specific, fragmented ‘backstories’ it is essential to approach the confluence of autopoietic desire and managerial rhetoric historically. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the alignment that can be established between the archive of Victorian self-improvement literature and the theories of individual, social and national uplift propagated in the period after slavery by some leaders of former slaves. This connection has been noted before as a distinctive stage upon which the drama of freedom’s acquisition was enacted. Samuel Smiles, Benjamin Disraeli and the other thinkers whose theories of race and family, self and nationality, education and ignorance found an eager audience among that new reading public, were not politically homogenous. Though Self-help was first published in 1859, it is easy to imagine what resonance its positive view of anti-slavery, Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson might have acquired in the context of post-bellum reconstruction or of state-making in nineteenth-century Liberia:

... it is nevertheless equally clear that men must be the active agents in their own well-being and well-doing; and that, however much the wise and the good must owe to others, they themselves must in the very nature of things be their own best helpers.

The technologies of the free black self that were deduced from various Victorian writings by
nineteenth-century polymaths of colour and melded into the political theory and liberation theologies of the black Atlantic, require an extended treatment. It will stretch back through the political imaginations of figures like Martin Delany and Lewis Woodson. That genealogy cannot be provided here. What is more important than the general category into which the resulting body of work might be placed, is its implausibly tidy articulation of individual, social and national goals which are linked together as if they were homologically related and could be nourished by the same sterling qualities of fortitude, discipline, resilience and stamina in which they were sourced. The legacy of that idea has also provided important resources upon which today’s black vernacular neoliberalism can draw. The story of striving - today’s ‘aspiration’ - seems more plausible and becomes more generally appealing when it is presented as the vindication or redemption of racialised forms of both natural difference and social suffering. Any individual’s successful battle to overcome the effects of racism can supply conclusive evidence that racism is no longer something to be concerned about.

The idea that each person is essentially responsible for their own fate is controversial within Christianity but it seems to have been experienced by many slave descendants as a liberatory promise - a dimension of freedom that could foster a transformation of people into agents, releasing them into dimensions of transcendent ipseity that were denied by racial discourse and its institutional vectors even in the post-slavery period. As Booker T. Washington would make clear, not least in his bitter conflict with DuBois over education, any well-executed task, no matter how menial or exploited, could be considered a source of self-restoring pride, manly discipline and racial opportunity if only its redemptive possibilities could be properly engaged. The inscription of a particular, post-slavery work ethic was combined with a sharply gendered mode of racial self-government involving distinctive vocabularies of self-description and self-mastery that were alloyed with favoured forms of conduct and even bodily technique. Lessons in the comportment of the respectable racial self were involved not only in Washington’s commitment to ‘the gospel of the toothbrush’ but in his well-publicised narration of the yogic sweeping of Mrs Ruffner’s recitation room, an event that provided the unanticipated mechanism for his personal elevation. That template was influential, at least until the mythology of Madame C. J. Walker’s minority entrepreneurship took wing some years later.

Brevity again demands that I pass over a long and complex sequence that should not be compressed. We should not, for example, overlook the great resonance of Marcus Garvey’s ‘African Fundamentalist’ notions of individual, national and racial uplift which were transmitted widely and had considerable impact upon the outlook of African nationalism in the early twentieth century, particularly among the elite US-educated leadership caste who studied at historically-black institutions like Fisk, Wilberforce, Howard and Virginia Theological Seminary. Even at that early stage, the view of racial self-reliance as the blissful outcome of independent business and commercial activity combined readily with the occult, esoteric wing of black nationalist and Pan-African philosophy as well as the vindicationist approach to nation-building it created.

Though aspects of the anti-lynching campaign against racial terror suggest otherwise, the acquisition of private, individual wealth seems to have been easily reconciled with more social understanding of enrichment as a collective enterprise conducted comfortably within the boundaries of a segregated world. The tension between these two approaches - one individual,
the other communal - would increase as unevenly developed US capitalism moved beyond its Fordist phase and the country's racial nomos was altered by economic crises on one side and the award of substantive citizenship to Negroes on the other. The resulting confusion is audible in James Brown's much sampled 'Funky President' (1974) and other spritely, Nixon-era hymns to the ideal of black capitalism.

MONEY, THAT'S WHAT I WANT

The enduring significance of African American culture as both a conduit and a source of these enduringly powerful examples of progress and uplift thanks to business acumen and financial gain is undeniable. Complexities in the multicultural marketing of difference mean that its appeal is not limited to black or minority ethnic audiences. The unique seductions and pleasures of the US black vernacular are not only part of that nation's cultural and military diplomacy, they get dispersed through the elaborate social and cultural networks that derive from unpredictable, private sources like the energetic advocacy of Oprah Winfrey. Contemporary heirs to the project of self-enrichment as collective vindication have pursued their activities even while the terms upon which individual and communal destinies can be connected have been recast by the historical and demographic changes mapped by William Julius Wilson and others. One of the best contemporary illustrations of this development at work is provided by the popularity of the neoliberal, self-help books penned by the Hawaiian motivational speaker, entrepreneur and financial educator Robert T. Kiyosaki whose work has acquired an enormous readership partly as a result of his repeated appearances on Winfrey's Show. Kiyosaki's career as an investor, economic adviser and proponent of financial learning through game-playing (Monopoly is a favourite) cannot be easily summed up. Since they first appeared in 1997, the many multi-million-selling volumes in his Time-Warner published 'Rich Dad, Poor Dad' series have been eagerly received among the would-be self-improvers and wealth-accumulators in North American ghettos and beyond. The latest book, *Midas Touch: Why Some Entrepreneurs Get Rich And Why Most Don't*, is one of several that have been co-written with Donald Trump and the Hollywood icon Will Smith has been another great publicist for Kiyosaki's approach to wealth and finance. The books are published in the genre of self-help literature but overlap into the imaginative territory marked out in the tradition of fiction that descends from Horatio Alger. Kiyosaki trades upon the idea that his readers are being provided with secret, arcane knowledge about wealth and income which has hitherto been the exclusive preserve of the rich. His original format staged the transfer of this precious information in the odd, autobiographical form of a family romance distinguished by two contending paternal influences. The first was Kiyosaki's own 'poor' biological father, an over-educated, salaried professor with a high income but no wealth who made the grave mistake of imagining that the family dwelling was an asset rather than a liability. The second was the entrepreneurial dynamo whose life-lessons supplied the strategic, pedagogical core of the first book: the father of one of Kiyosaki's childhood friends. This was a book about the proper modes of masculinity as much as the correct technique for accumulating wealth. Written long before the sub-prime mortgage scandal, much of it was devoted to the time-worn strategy of buying multiple properties and then renting them out. More insidious is the work that the newly-enlightened, wealth-bound man is expected to perform on himself in order to ensure
that he has properly adopted a rich person’s view of the world and its manifold opportunities which derive in no small measure from successful prosecution of colonial warfare.

Rich dad used to tell Mike and me stories about his trips to Texas. ‘If you really want to learn the attitude of how to handle risk, losing and failure, go to San Antonio and visit the Alamo. The Alamo is a great story of brave people who chose to fight, knowing there was no hope of success against overwhelming odds. They chose to die instead of surrendering. It’s an inspiring story worthy of study: nonetheless, it’s still a tragic military defeat. They got their butts kicked. A failure if you will. They lost. So how do Texans handle failure? They still shout, “Remember The Alamo”’.  

AN AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

Far from the Lone Star State, many of these themes have been taken up in the writing and proselytising of Britain’s black nationalists. Work done by one of the most interesting of them, Pascoe Sawyers, becomes an index of how that political tendency has been transformed during the last two decades. His goals are rather more grand than merely individual wealth acquisition. A self-published primer MePLC: Your Life Is Your Business was inspired by the work of a number of North America’s conservative apostles of self-help: Brian Tracy, Earl Nightingale, Jim Rohn. Conveniently, it also boasts a preface by the ubiquitous Tim Campbell and provides a wealth of useful opportunities to consider the theoretical counterpointing of vernacular neoliberalism among black communities in Britain.  

Though he had an extensive track record in the field of local government, Sawyers’ personal website announces that he is now an influential ‘leadership development’ consultant and author of a ‘ground-breaking personal development book’ in which, among other things, he identifies being Fearless, Optimistic, Creative, Unique and a Storyteller as the five key traits shown by individuals who are effective “leaders of self”. That coinage bears the imprint of the Afrocentric psychology of Na’im Akbar, another Winfrey guest. It is a telling phrase which might also be read profitably as an update of Marcus Garvey’s near-mystical commitment to the racial ideal of ‘self-first’.  

Logically, one cannot be anything other than a leader of others but this confusing concept of self-leadership neatly distils some of the tensions in a poetic and autopoeitic idiom which requires the multiplication of the unitary self as part of a retreat from the world. Cultivation of the will necessitates a privatisation of resistance. The same jarring concept neatly captures this inward turn as well as the scalar disruption involved in the implosion and disaggregation of the social under the pressures of neoliberalism’s impact. We are reminded that there is no such thing as society. The slick substitution of identity for political solidarity fixes the transformation consequent upon the privatisation and individualisation of anti-racist endeavour that generous readers might detect in Sawyers’ poetic blending of self-help pieties and management-speak with well-worn orientalist and black nationalist themes: ‘Me, myself and I are the only people I have total control over, which is why, in the final analysis, my life is unashamedly about me, me, me’. The link between this perspective and racial solidarity remains obscure.  

During the 1990s, Sawyers had been editor of The Alarm, a lively, independent black nationalist publication based in northwest London that combined cultural and political content
in supposed service of pan-African solidarity and collective community development. Its occult, Afrocentric disposition aside, *The Alarm* was friendly to the then rising agency of the Nation of Islam and drew inspiration from their continuing commitment to the collective racial gains that could be won through small business activity. This has remained a strategic priority for the organisation during the intervening years. Reporting recently on the seventeenth (2012) annual Black Enterprise Entrepreneurs Conference and Expo, the Nation of Islam newspaper, *The Final Call* commented that

The number of Black-owned businesses in the US had ‘increased by 60.5 percent between 2002 and 2007, raking in receipts of $137.5 billion. Yet despite this growth, Black-owned businesses still make up only seven percent of all US businesses and 87 percent of Black businesses had sales of less than $50,000 ... 54.5 percent have only between one and four employees’.

A torrent of statistics framed the news that this year’s conference included a special presentation by Tavis Smiley, the media celebrity, business partner and best friend of radical, prophetic socialist Professor Cornel West. In his address to the NOI gathering, Smiley ‘shared some of the successes and challenges of building his brand, which includes a publishing company, speakers’ bureau and media entities’.32

Neither the demographics nor the spatialisation of Britain’s minority communities correspond with the approaches to wealth, class and community that emerged from the US racial nomos and are commonplace in its particular traditions of black capitalism. So, Sawyers moves further into an explicitly neoliberal idiom by developing the timely suggestion that ‘we are all chief executives in our own Personal Leadership Company and [showing] why accepting that your life is a business is the first and most important step along the road to fulfilling your aspirations, whatever they are’.

This dubious proposition is probably the obverse of debates about the legal personhood of corporate bodies and their ability to benefit from the juridical order of individual rights. It highlights where the ebbing traditions of Ethiopianism and vindicationism have yielded to generalised neoliberal dogma and a managerialist ideology.

Sawyers is open about the origins of his approach in US history and culture. In an interesting section of the book on the fundamental importance of optimism, a positive mental attitude and adding positive emotions to your ‘MePLC emotional bank account’ he suggests connections between his philosophical approach and that of a range of north American worthies from William James to Peter Drucker via Henry Ford.

There is a risk of taking this narcissistic rhetoric too seriously and misinterpreting its metaphorical power. However, a significant threshold has been crossed when we move on from saying that our life is like a business to saying that it is, in fact, a business like any, or all, others. There is a vast deal of difference between approaching one’s life as a business and relating to it as if it were, for example, either a gift from God or a work of art. In Sawyers’ approach, business seems to have taken over the space previously inhabited by those alternatives: the first sacred and the second profane. Of course, the supplanting of the ‘Afro-baptist’ tradition by forms of evangelical Christianity as concerned with the accumulation of wealth and power as with gaining access to heaven is another recent change which supports the generalisation of neoliberal ideas.34 One African evangelical church based in London attracts its multicultural
congregation with promotional material that does not mention God or Heaven specifically but lays emphasis instead upon technical ‘tools’ such as wealth creation and personal development seminars. Their recruitment website sets out what prospective visitors to their holy events can expect to find:

An interactive 90-minute seminar of [sic] the power of realisation will be delivered, complete with prayers, real-life stories and much more! Please note that this event does not promise to change your life but is guaranteed to provide tools that have been tested by many, that can motivate and empower you to achieve the change you desire. You are advised to arrive early to avoid disappointment as seating at the various locations is limited.35

HIPHOP: MARTIALITY, MASCULINITY, MACHIAVELLI

Enthusiasm for the selfish pursuit of riches has been disseminated through the medium of hiphop culture where it has been combined with ruthlessness and an explicit appetite for domination and manipulation that is also apparently a business asset. An excellent contemporary example of this confluence is provided by the activities of rapper, producer and entrepreneur Curtis Jackson aka 50 Cent. Jackson is a complex figure whose Republican political affiliation and broad business interests illustrate the realignment I am exploring. He is something like a popular avatar of the demotic neoliberalism that is both steeped in and warranted by several generations of uplift and self-reliance narratives that supplied ideational ballast to earlier versions of the proposition that liberation from racial hierarchy could be achieved through the medium of black capitalism. Once again, it would be entirely wrong to imagine that the allure of this kind of example is limited by its exclusive appeal to African Americans or other black people.

Late in 2009, 50 Cent published a book about how to conduct oneself morally in social life and in business. It was called The 50th Law and was co-written with Robert Greene, a successful author who had come to 50’s attention as a result of earlier volumes on ruthless business strategy and psychology. One of these, The 48 laws of power - an avowedly Machiavellian self-help handbook - had proved highly appealing to a young African American readership weaned on the politer fare churned out by mainstream music biz entrepreneurs like Russell Simmons who had co-written a bestseller in 2007 - with a foreword by Donald Trump - that promised access to a mere twelve laws which could orient readers to both success and happiness.36 They had turned in that direction seeking guidance and discovered a contemporary successor to those Victorian publications that specified how to take charge of one’s own destiny in the most difficult circumstances. The importance of Greene’s book can be gauged from the fact that it has proved to be extremely popular in US prison libraries where it has edged Malcolm X’s autobiography into second place as the most requested volume.37 Its success resulted in Greene becoming a consultant to a range of corporate actors. His trademark writing technique employs aphoristic fragments drawn from an unlikely pantheon - Bismarck, Catherine the Great, Mao Tse Tung, Haile Selassie and various others - in order to illustrate real-world application of his 48 rules which are designed to guide the acquisition and exercise of power. He employs what he announces loudly is a self-consciously amoral approach, mimicking Machiavellian and Nietzschean language and leaving the informed reader to weigh the ethical implications
of his laws they may opt to implement. This way of proceeding provides a tepid, mainstream endorsement of the thug-life gangsterdom affirmed in the uplift-legend of 50 Cent’s well-remunerated journey from the streets, via the operating table, to the recording studio and, eventually, the boardroom. Greene’s books became influential among hip-hop’s organic intellectuals many of whom are reported to have had his homiletic aphorisms tattooed onto their buffed-up bodies. Predictably, Greene’s work is name-checked in numerous hip-hop tunes while his connection to 50 Cent has rewarded the latter a welcome measure of respectability with which to lard his affected contempt for others judged weaker than himself. Unlike 50, Greene has proclaimed himself to be a supporter of the Democratic party. He restated his liberal politics in a 2012 interview with The Guardian. He says:

I’m a huge Obama supporter, Romney is satan to me. The great thing about America is that you can come from the worst circumstances and become something remarkable. It’s Jay-Z and 50 Cent and Obama and my Jewish ancestors - that’s the America we want to celebrate. Not the vulture capitalist. These morons like Mitt Romney, they produce nothing. Republicans are feeding off fairytales and that’s what did them in this year and hopefully will keep doing them in forever, because they’re a lot of scoundrels.

In this context, it is important to mention that the jointly written volume was produced to resemble a Bible. The edges of its pages were gilded and the cover was embellished with an ominous gothic script in Latin: ‘Nihil timendum est’ (fear nothing). With that choice, the authors and the publisher’s marketing department tried to make a selling point out of the fact that the book is addressed to the crisis of meaning generated by the disassociation of Ethiopianism, PanAfricanism and their Christian underpinnings.

Rising to that challenge, Green and 50 Cent attempt a comprehensive reformulation of African American history and its modern cultural canon. Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Malcolm X, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and a host of other notables were ventriloquist to facilitate the reconfiguration of African American culture as a paean to the psychological and moral attributes of the hyper-individuated, neo-liberal self, cast in the ideal form of the merciless and fearless business leader unencumbered by doubt of any kind. The orientalism of this idiom is brought home not only by the frequent citations to Sun Tzu but also in a pseudo-Buddhist stream of ascetic commentary that affords a sequence of alibis for absolute selfishness. Perhaps unexpectedly, this strand of thought culminates in the suggestion that life is best lived against the horizon of death.

The final chapter in this ghettoized journey from Amour propre back to Amour de soi is entitled ‘Confront Your Mortality: the sublime’ and takes its epigraph from Frederick Douglass’ famous combat with the brutal overseer Edward Covey. The book concludes contradictorily with an invocation of oceanic connection to everything that resolves into 50 Cent’s final pearl of wisdom:

When I nearly died, it made me think - this can happen again at any second. I better hurry and do what I want. I started to live like I never lived before. When the fear of death is gone, then nothing can bother you and nobody can stop you.

The place of death in what is now an identifiably New Age script, suggests that this variety of
self-governance is based in business ethics but extends into a solipsistic, determinedly anti-social approach to life. Its patented individualism conforms proudly to military specifications but is purged of either duty or lateral obligation to others. This is a world without reciprocity that connects with the rigors of incarceration as well as to the non-negotiable rules of a natural hierarchy in which aristocrats of the will can dominate others without the unwelcome intrusion of conscience.

Something of the same masculinist voice guides a whole apparatus of mentoring, role-modeling and the other reparative schemes premised upon the notion that the destiny of black communities resides essentially in the integrity of their beleaguered manhood which can be transformed by a series of technical initiatives. In Britain, boys and young men provided the initial target for governmental intervention. They were judged to have been presented negatively in the media but rather than address the media habits implicated in that outcome, government agencies would rather try to re-engineer the outlook and conduct of the boys themselves.

... research has highlighted the largely negative image of black boys and young black men in the media. The outcome has been a recognised need to improve the visibility of positive black male role models at a national level.93

This approach is symptomatic of neoliberalism’s preferences for post- and virtual sociality over the slow labour of building solidarity in real time. It is drawn from a scheme to re-make black identity through the reconfiguration of gender relations that was initially elevated into government planning by New Labour’s 2008 REACH project.44

Since then, war in Afghanistan and elsewhere has become much more important in marking out the boundaries of the UK’s imagined community. The result is a novel, diverse configuration of authoritarian political culture in which burgeoning militarisation is addressed, among other things, to the projection of the United Kingdom as a nation that is increasingly integrated and only residually multicultural.

Any stubbornly persistent cultural variations are made visible through the conduct of gender relations which require proper management if aspiration, opportunity and the conditions for assimilation are to be maximised. Only that holy labour can really restore the nation’s departed greatness and conserve its ebbing cultural distinctiveness assailed less by encounters with alterity than by the corrosive impact of neoliberal capitalism.

The distinctly biopolitical dynamic at work in the embedding of a neoliberal outlook has been treated at length by others.45 Here, I want to point out only that, in line with the new role of sporting endeavour as a technology that divides the world tidily into elite winners and a mass of precarious losers, it also reveals the changing axiology of racial difference and the new currency of an unruly multiculture far too easily captured and harnessed to serve corporate ends. Small wonder that after being central to the festive Olympic celebration of Britain’s NHS, Jessica Ennis, the poster-girl for a post-imperial country’s dynamic futurity, ended up leasing her own image to become a ‘partner’ in the corrosive business of selling private health care. Jessica Ennis took on the role of ‘vitality ambassador’ for the insurance company Pruhealth.

I think the Vitality programme is absolutely brilliant - we all love to be rewarded for hard work and Vitality has so many ways to incentivise its members. Everything I stand for is
echoed in the values of Vitality and I hope I can make people see that achieving your personal health goals is really a matter of planning the journey and sticking with it.\textsuperscript{46}

WHAT THIS ARGUMENT IS NOT

In some earlier work, I tried to turn attention towards the revolutionary conservatism of sections of the trans-national black movement in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{47} At that time, a central seam of black nationalist theory had encompassed occultist and corporatist tendencies which, in different ways, carried the technocultural and hierarchical stamps of a generic fascist culture. Since then, those tendencies have not only moved closer to the mainstream but also proved compatible with the ruthless 'Machiavellian' inclinations of much managerialist ideology and the selfish individualism of the thug turned CEO - the same, determined, upwardly-mobile figure re-affirmed in the writing of Robert Greene and 50 Cent. There are multiple contradictions in that formation. The hustler ethic espoused reflexively at an ironic distance by Jay Z in his autobiographical volume \textit{Jay Z Decoded} is not, for example, readily amenable to the strict, penal discipline that contextualises the pretentious, pseudo-philosophical speculations of Greene and 50. However, they are both part of the same substantial political shift in which selfishness and privatisation have displaced racial structures onto an interpersonal scale and facilitated the replacement of imperfect democracy by what we are told is the non-negotiable force of a natural hierarchy.

This limited intervention can only scratch the surface of a deep and complex cultural history. Like the relationship between individual success and the possibility of collective uplift, the strategy, which suggests that the routine damage wrought by racial orders can be privately overcome through the acquisition of personal wealth, remains an enormous issue. Their histories must be reconstructed with great care. They open eventually into larger problems bearing upon the ways in which successive forms of capitalism have been able to solicit the co-operation of their primary victims into their own exploitation and destruction.

I would like to be able to take for granted that these modes of domination always involve conflict but it is probably better to be more explicit and acknowledge that even sporadic and reactive resistance against them matters greatly. Those immediate reactions can carry the possibility of alternative ways of organising life and work even in environments where such speculation has been forbidden. Yet that precious, necessary resistance can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from accommodation. Its ambiguities mean that it should not be banalised but nor should we pretend that it is always likely to triumph in attractive, dialectical or teleological patterns. The elemental struggles for justice and human dignity can have no end point, so there is no final triumph to be won. Rather than focus on endless resistance supported by tireless criticism, this short piece asks not only how particular groups of people have become resigned to neoliberal capitalism but also how they have been induced to enter into its hall of distorting mirrors seeking the hope that by buying in rather than selling out, their lives and the world will become better.

I want to emphasise that the contradictory motivations of neoliberalism's dupes and footsoldiers are not being ridiculed here. This should be read as a plea that their reactions should be taken seriously - certainly more seriously than the peddlers and celebrants of neoliberal theology are inclined to take the false hopes they disseminate with such cruel cynicism. I
also feel obliged to state that I am not wholly against the idea that accountable management of institutions might, on occasion, improve their functioning. However, I do not think that the uniform or ritual application of vacuous self-help and managerial theories is essentially positive or that their sometimes bizarre poetics are likely to defend or enhance democracy in the workplace.

Neoliberal techniques of power, management and communication have repeatedly been allied with technological change to generate conflict, compound inequality and increase unhappiness. They are deployed as part of a battle to control work processes and fatally to diminish the autonomy of working people. This position cuts against the achievements of a whole political generation of black community activists who have, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, accepted the privatisation of the struggle against racial inequality and hierarchy and begun to sell their expertise and insight in the form of consultancy services. As the dreams of collective uplift have been replaced by the practical gravitas of evidence-based expert guidance, this group has moved in to contest the heavily fortified spaces of corporate and governmental power, armed with all the tools and techniques of the neoliberal revolution which are disposed to refine and enhance capitalist control of social and cultural life rather than to feed the possibility of any alternative to it. If they have not become resigned to the unjust condition of the world, they must imagine it can be tinkered with and that the lot of minorities will be improved as a result. To put it mildly, I retain grave doubts about what can be achieved by implementing the credo of ‘diversity management’ in the private sector and I have looked in vain for reflexive, critical commentaries on the impact of these supposed reforms on the fading life of Britain’s dwindling public sector institutions. There, the expertise of diversity management in policy development and in institutional administration has usually been an aid to the privatisation process.

Given past responses to my work, it is necessary for me to conclude by saying that I do not regard black people as uniquely gullible or think that they are any more vulnerable than anybody else to being tricked by the operations of totalising, neoliberal ideology. It bears emphasis that minority audiences or readerships are by no means always the primary market for racial stories of authoritarian (self)discipline and eventual redemption. Contemporary racism will delight in narratives of this type which terminate in the idea that if one is prepared to graft, even deeply entrenched racial hierarchy and inequality can be overcome. Instead of that verdict, struggles against racism, to protect community, pursue justice and enhance democracy both locally and remotely must be remembered and celebrated. However, just like the rest of the left with whose fate the struggles of racialised minorities have long been entwined, dissenting forces have not proved capable of applying a brake to neoliberalism’s regressive reforms. The continuing effects of systematic racism on black life cannot be dismissed and there are instances where that very impact seems - perhaps even where racism is to be sacrificed in capital’s interests - to have inclined people towards the solutions proffered by neoliberal styles of thought which can be taken over, possessed and made one’s own. In other words, the history of being denied recognition as an individual has actually enhanced the appeal of particular varieties of extreme individualism. It is absurd to imagine that the trans-national formation of black Atlantic culture is somehow permanently sanctified by its historic roots in the suffering of slaves. That noble history offers no prophylaxis against the selfish ecstasy of neoliberal norms.
In spite of racism, Britain’s black communities are more present in the country’s evolving cultural mainstream than we sometimes appreciate. Neoliberal culture and economic habits unearthed the value in previously abjected black life. There is now a distinctive local version of the mainstream themes of the neoliberal revolution which has been shaped by a restless, global capitalism that needs to be able to operate in as many different accents as it can. Where the demotic masquerades as the democratic and populism distorts politics, there is good reason to ask whether an authentic liberatory moment might not reside in postcolonial peoples and minority ethnic groups being just as selfish, ignorant, right-wing and conservative as everybody else? I am not proposing that depressing threshold as the measure of redemption from racial hierarchy. But we must ask whether it is only a vestigial sentimentality that prevents us from being able to accede to it as a new index of Britain’s integration.

Notes
8. These elements combine most notably in the extraordinary figure of the maimed, black, heroic, ex-marine turned property entrepreneur, Ben McBean. http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/3824670/Ben-McBean-now-successful-businessman.html.
9. BBC news interview 12.08.12.
10. See for example Unleashing Aspiration: The Government Response to the Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, http://www.ukipg.org.uk/meetings/further_and_higher_education_working_party/Unleashing-Aspiration_Govt_Response.pdf, last accessed 2.01.2013; ‘The Government recognises that a culture of aspiration, as well as the provision of opportunity, is a central part of a socially mobile society. The aspirations people have to better themselves drive social progress. We will work to ensure young people aim high and aspire to make the most of the opportunities available to them, through an aspiration raising campaign, improved careers guidance and a network of inspirational mentors’ (p.10). See also Tess Jowell’s 2015 essay ‘Tackling the “poverty of aspiration” through rebuilding the Public Realm’, http://www.demos.co.uk/files/tessjowellpublicrealmessay.pdf.

36 New Formations


38. Greene’s blog can be found at: http://www.powereducationandbear.com/, last accessed 3.01.2013.


41. See my discussion of this episode in Black Atlantic Harvard University Press, 1993.

42. 50 Cent and Robert Greene, The 50th Law, Profile Books, p288.

43. Dear Mr Gilroy,  
I am sending you this email by way of introduction, I work for ******** & ******** and we have been asked to assist Hazel Bears (See State, DCLG) on a new initiative called REACH. This has come out of the Stephen Lawrence Steerling Group and the Race Equality Advisory Panel - research has highlighted the largely negative image of black boys and young black men in the media. The outcome has been a recognised need to improve the visibility of positive black male role models at a national level.  
That’s where we come in. We’ve been asked to help find the government’s first national black male role models. We are approaching people who might have an interest in taking part who could be an inspiration to young black men. The time commitment will be one day per month for a period of one year and the role will be to act as representatives on TV, radio, give talks, go into schools etc. We are looking for 20 role models but everyone who expresses an interest will be asked to play a role in some capacity. We are letting people know about the initiative and encouraging applications. I have enclosed the details for your information and would be extremely interested in your thoughts and ideas.  
(For your information the closing date has been extended to 15th September)  
With kind regards  

