THE PROBLEMATIC DEPICTION OF BLACK BRITISH MASCULINITY IN GHOSTWRITTEN FOOTBALL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES (A CRITICAL ESSAY)

Ashley Hickson-Lovence

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ABSTRACT

Football is widely recognised as a cultural arena in which the discourses of race and racism are openly at play in Britain. Indeed, the pressures that Black players and referees face in navigating bias and prejudice whilst participating in the sport at which they excel has become highly visible in the contemporary moment. This thesis engages with the representations and realities of Black footballing lives through both creative and critical means. The creative component comprises a novel, *Your Show*, that offers a fictionalised portrait of Uriah Rennie's pioneering efforts to make it to the top of his career, and stay there, amidst the intense scrutiny of the British public and media as the first Black referee in the UK Premier League. The critical component interrogates the problematic depiction of Black British masculinity in a selection of ghostwritten football autobiographies. It explores how racialised discourses have shaped the representations of these sporting lives, calling on familiar narrative tropes of an exceptional Black sporting life against the odds to reinforce negative representations of being Black, male and British in the modern context. It examines the limitations of these works, penned by writers with primarily journalistic backgrounds who have never played the game professionally and who have little shared life experience with those whose lives they have been tasked to tell in the first-person. In conversation with a cluster of recent critical studies on Black masculinity and Black sporting lives, my critical work investigates the role and the impact of racialised narratives in diminishing the stories of Black British footballing lives, and the ways in which they ventriloquise dominant, mainly negative, societal views of Black masculinity in British society.

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INTRODUCTION

'The football autobiography, often dismissed as a formulaic source whose poor quality and uncertain provenance renders it peripheral, should be recognised as one of the main types of evidence for the study of representations of the footballer's image'

(Woolridge 2008: 620)

Whilst there has been little detailed academic engagement with the subject of footballing autobiographies to date, Joyce Woolridge's 2008 paper *These Sporting Lives: Football Autobiographies 1945–1980* describes the emergence of the professional footballer's autobiography as a 'post-Second World War phenomenon' (Woolridge 2008: 620) and offers some helpful critical observations of this genre. In her work, Woolridge presents the history of the genre, which dates back to *Football Ambassador: The Autobiography of an Arsenal Legend* by Eddie Hapgood, the first full-length work published in 1945 by the former Arsenal captain. As she observes, before then, 'the sporting autobiography concentrated on the middle-class or upper-class protagonist' (Woolridge 2008: 624).

In Woolridge's reading of this 1945 founding text, she describes how the football autobiography was 'one of the chief written vehicles for the professional footballer to present himself to the public' (Woolridge 2008: 620) at a time when the popularity of football was re-emerging after the interruption of the Second World War. As the sport gained profile, there was an increased interest in the lives of the players and an appetite to understand more about these sporting figures when not on the pitch. In her early paper, Woolridge identifies a striking relationship between football, the autobiographical form, and the presentation of masculinity, remarking on how the 'tensions, elisions and evasions that are part of its presentation, have much to reveal about both conformist and oppositional aspects of masculinity' (Woolridge 2008: 622). This observation remains relevant to the ghostwritten autobiographies recently published as the close readings and discussion that follow in this paper will show. While Woolridge also argues that 'these autobiographies construct the dominant consensual ideal of masculinity, but they also show the emergence of alternative masculine constructions' (Woolridge 2008: 622), the presentation of alternatives is seldom featured in Black British ghostwritten autobiographies. Indeed, while it is these possible

'alternative constructions' that deviate from the generic, tired and inadequate presentations of what it means to be a Black British male footballer that interest me the most, regrettably, such examples are seldom found in the mainstream market, even today.

Considering this genre's development and its readership, Woolridge's discussion of how the football autobiography increased in profile and significance draws attention to the historical shift of a post-war culture that saw a growing interest in the lives of working-class professionals among the commercial reading public. She details how all the twenty-two footballing autobiographies produced between 1945 and 1953 were framed as 'exemplary lives' (Woolridge 2008: 620), drawing attention to the way in which the genre supported wider 'optimistic narratives of apprenticeship, triumph over adversity and stability and growth. Football autobiographies have rarely departed from this model' (Woolridge 2008: 623). This argument regarding the genre's inclination for narrating 'exemplary lives' is particularly significant, as it is an expectation that becomes acutely loaded in relation to the lives of Black British subjects given that racialisation complicates narratives of class mobility. In this context, 'exemplary' stands for an escape from the troubling and narrow archetypes of Black male lives presented in these works and more generally that foreground social deprivation as a result of intergenerational poverty, the dysfunctional family, the shadow of criminality, and sometimes questionable and unscrupulous off-the-field antics.

As Woolridge acknowledges, despite the genre's growing popularity, in which the sales of football autobiographies 'steadily increased' (Woolridge 2008: 620) after the 1940s, the relationship between these works and the presentation of lived lives was not without issue. Woolridge notes how the 'autobiography is a highly problematic source, and the football autobiography, usually ghost-written and often produced quickly, sometimes with notoriously little input from its subject, can present particular difficulties in its use and interpretation' (Woolridge 2008: 621). By positioning the football autobiography within the wider context of the genre, Woolridge argues that 'since the 1970s, autobiography as a sub-genre has received intense scrutiny from scholars across several disciplines and has become central to radical, dissident strands within literary studies and history and increasingly important in studies of special, minority or "excluded" groups' (Woolridge 2008: 622). While this observation suggests that a demand for particular life stories might indicate that the football autobiography offers an important narrative opportunity for representing notably

underrepresented Black British male lives, these lives continue to be mischaracterised within this genre, reflecting wider discriminatory mechanisms and structures that continue to shape societal perceptions.

All the same, by drawing attention to the representational opportunities afforded by autobiographical writings for voicing lives that are otherwise silent, denied or mis-transcribed on their own terms, Woolridge helpfully questions and complicates the perceptions of footballers' autobiographies as necessarily popular and populist commercially-driven publications. Indeed, Woolridge's work remains important precisely because it argues for serious attention to the football autobiography which is 'often dismissed as a formulaic source whose poor written quality and uncertain provenance renders it peripheral' (Woolridge 2008: 627). It therefore allows for a life-based narrative that has the potential, if retold sensitively, to do justice to a footballing subject's life, acting as an insightful unravelling of a provocative personal story. This is a possibility I have pursued in my creative work *Your Show*, which is a creative retelling of the life and career of former Premier League football referee Uriah Rennie, the first – and still the only – Black football official to referee in the highest division of the English game.

Woolridge's refusal to dismiss the more searching possibilities of this form is a valuable critical gesture, however, her ideal version of the reading and writing of a footballer's life through the contemporary ghostwritten autobiography is not entirely realised within many of the works under study in this essay, which leads to questions around whose story is actually being told and what role is played by the white ghostwriter's assumptions in rendering the Black subject. These questions about genre, authenticity and story have been at the heart of critical arguments around life writing for decades. According to Philippe Lejeune's canonical definition in his influential work *On Autobiography*, 'in order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general) the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical' (Lejeune 1989: 5). Such a close 'pact,' to use Lejeune's term, between these three parties is seriously disrupted by the presence of the ghostwriter, whose presence may be intended to be spectral and seamless, but who nevertheless presents an intrusive link in the idealised chain of identicality presented by Lejeune.

The very variety of narrative fields within this broad genre - autofiction, life writing, memoir - indicates how all attempts to replicate life in narrative are inevitably fictionalised to some extent. Many theorists of autobiography have drawn attention to the impossibility of writing this seamless, stable self, even when the author and narrator are the same person and others have pointed to the genre's tendency to favour the representation of white, male, privileged lives.[1] Questions around the politics of gender, class and race have only been central to theories of autobiography since the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s, John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall compiled three volumes of *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* 3 vols. (Brighton: Harvester, 1984, 1987, 1989) and this monumental work included more than two thousand working-class autobiographies, although the proportion of women's narratives was low. Work addressing the particular and varied forms of women's autobiographies became established through the 1990s. Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* was important for identifying a broad spectrum of practices through which women are able to claim 'self-representational agency' (Gilmore 1994: 5). Indeed, the recovery and research of women's autobiographies has become an established field now, as outlined in publications such as *Women and Autobiography* edited by Allison B. Kimmich and Martine Watson Brownley.

While these critical studies show how the genre of autobiography and its reception have been shaped by considerations of class and gender, racialisation has also been critical to the ways in which Black lives have been narrated and read. The earliest published autobiographies of Black subjects, such as those of Mary Prince and Olaudah Equaino, have often been obscured by their generic categorisation as slave narratives as they have been read as being of historical rather than literary interest. Moreover, in these works, the articulation of individual Black lives was compromised by the processes of editing and verification that were seen as necessary for Black experiences to be considered suitable for the page. These life stories were also shaped by the demands of the abolition movement who supported these publications and did not want to offend readers with accounts of violence, even though these were fundamental to the experience of enslavement. While the pressure that is exerted on Black writers to narrate particular versions of their lives has changed over the centuries, the same

[1] For more detailed discussions see the essays included in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*.

question of 'self-representational agency' that Gilmore discusses in relation to gendered autobiographies remains relevant to racialised life stories.[2] Interestingly, while there is a significant body of critical writing on slave narratives, there is still a dearth of critical material on contemporary Black British autobiography, despite the fact this genre is currently flourishing. In the twenty-first century, the publication of a range of Black British life writing has been hugely important to advancing debates around race in Britain today and the genre appears to have offered representational agency to a fascinating range of lives, across generations and professions, including the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (*Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* in 2017), the writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch (*Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* in 2018), the screenwriter and actress Michela Coel (*Misfits: A Personal Manifesto* in 2021), and the actor Lenny Henry (*Who Am I, Again?* in 2019 and co-editor of *Black British Lives Matter: A Clarion Call for Equality* in 2021).

Despite the recent publication of these Black British autobiographical works that speak lucidly about the experiences of racism and racialisation, the ongoing constriction of expectations and possibilities regarding a sensitive and full account remains pertinent in relation to the ghostwritten autobiographical works of Black British footballers. Although my own work discusses ghostwritten Black British footballing autobiographies, it nevertheless follows Woolridge in seeking to explore the complexity of this genre with particular attention to the gaps between the narrative constructions and the lives they tell, as well as to the social meaning and purchase of the dominant, racialised stories that have been templated and circulated. I shall examine more closely how the final narrative product within this genre still consistently fails to engage beyond the familiar, conventional narrative of success against the odds and repeatedly fails to capture the fullness needed to comprehensively explore the subject's life and identity as a multidimensional and individualised story.

One of the major difficulties in approaching the football autobiography as a source of evidence in the authentic depiction of the Black British experience is the question of authorship, as 'very few of the football autobiographies are penned by their subjects and the actual writers of the text (often football journalists) are sometimes credited alongside the footballer' (Woolridge 2008: 622). However, while Knapp and Hulbert note that it is 'not

[2] See *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* for a range of critical engagements with nineteenth- and twentieth-century autobiographical writings and issues of race.

uncommon to acknowledge the roles of ghostwriters with words like "with" and "and"' (Knapp and Hubert 2017: 7), in the case of the footballing autobiographies under critical scrutiny here, such direct indicators of collaborative construction infrequently appear, although the acknowledgements to a few do indicate some level of partnership. As a consequence, the way in which 'the ghost may push the limits of authenticity' (Knapp and Hulbert 2017: 3) is not evident to readers and the ghostwritten works under consideration in this dissertation more clearly masquerade as authentic Black British footballing lives and voices. Given the problematic depictions of these lives that are presented through this form, and that will be discussed in the chapters to come, in this context the central ethical concern around ghostwriting is not so much one of attribution ('how to ascribe authorship of a written work in a way that is both fair and accurate' (Knapp and Hubert 2017: 7)), as much as one of asserted authenticity. It is not simply that 'the requirement that the ghostwriter remain invisible to the audience can appear to be in conflict with important ethical principles, including transparency and truthfulness' (Knapp and Hubert 2017: 10), but also that the story constructed and narrated by the ghostwriter as another person's personal truth may contravene the expectations of an ethical engagement with that life.

Knapp and Hulbert present a somewhat idealised version of the possibility for authenticity in a ghostwritten autobiography, discussing how 'individuals who use the services of a ghostwriter in the creation of a memoir have the capacity to stay true to self, and to the specific expertise they purport to have' (Knapp and Hulbert 2017: 131). They note Andre Agassi as an example of this practice. Yet they also acknowledge that in relation to celebrity lives 'it may be said that entertainment, not authenticity, is the primary concern of the consuming public [and] celebrities-turned-author…deliver what the public wants and is willing to purchase' (Knapp and Hulbert 2017: 131). It is at this strained nexus of public demand and staying true to self that the issues around the negative racialisation of Black footballing lives come into view and the question of authenticity becomes especially problematic. The football autobiography must appease and negotiate the various needs and demands of the reader, subject, publishers, market, and of the ghostwriter themselves; a process which has thornier intricacies when the footballer subject is a man of colour. The way in which the ghostwriter's understanding of their subjects and of their role may be seen to shape the content, language and overall message of the autobiography they write for a Black British footballer will be discussed in more detail later in this essay. However, it is

relevant here to bring forward a consideration of the extent to which the ghostwriter's duty to relate 'the story to the ghost in a truthful and authentic way…to maintain personal authenticity' (Knapp and Hulbert 2017: 140) is compromised by their lack of commitment to understanding what authenticity might mean for their ghosted subjects. This is an important concern given that the life stories of Black British footballers are largely ghostwritten by white journalists and conform to popular racialised narratives of Black British masculinity more than to individualised stories of 'personal authenticity'. Moreover, sold as real-life stories, it has to be noted that these ghostwritten autobiographies can subsequently play a part in perpetuating misleading and often diminishing cultural myths about Black masculinity that close down, rather than open up, the space for articulating a more complicated lived authenticity.

In her work on the gender politics of ghostwriting in the celebrity memoir, Hannah Yellin draws attention to 'the power dynamics of ghosting' and how these intersect with the 'historical representational lack' (Yellin 2020: 9) of women's stories to curate particular versions of female celebrity that are shaped by the 'weight of convention upon them' (Yellin 2020: 269). While Yellin's focus is primarily on gender politics and this paper's focus is on race politics, her attention to 'the weight of recurring conventions' and to 'gendered conventions [that] appear inescapable' chimes with the reliance within ghostwritten Black British footballing autobiographies on recurring narratives and tropes of Black masculinity that are clearly mediated by and maintain wider cultural narratives underpinned by racialised assumptions. Yellin's argument that ghostwritten memoirs of these women 'tell us much about women's wider status in society' (Yellin 2020: 267) is also true about those of Black British footballers. Similarly, her discussion of the need to pay attention to the way in which ghostwriters, at best, negotiate and, at worst, serve the interests of the market over those of representing the authenticity of their subject is directly applicable to the ghostwritten autobiographies of Black British footballers. As Yellin argues, 'if we smooth over the presence of the ghost as previous reading models have, we miss the ways in which the space of the ghost comes with a risk of reinforcing the fallacy that real [wo]men are secondary to generic convention, readerly satisfaction, commercial profit' (Yellin 2020: 43).

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the football autobiography is archetypally distinguishable in its dominant, polished, publishable form. Outwardly, it has an easily

identifiable aesthetic featuring a prominent cover image; inside, content-wise, the writing usually conforms to an archetypal narrative structure and utilises obvious marketing channels that allow for general accessibility amongst its broad readership. Unquestionably, the mainstream football autobiography is also limited in its form and content. There are certain conventions to which the ghostwriter seemingly has to conform to secure accessibility amongst its core readership. Reviewing a range of recent publications including Vince Hilaire's 2018 autobiography *Vince - The Autobiography of Vince Hilaire,* Leroy Rosenior's 2017 "*It's Only Banter*" and Mark Walters' 2018's *Wingin' It*, it would appear that the cultural register in which to retell these life stories cannot afford to be too literary so as to not alienate its target readership. Additionally, as the genre demands, the publication must include a plate section with a montage of images of the central subject as a young boy, usually depicted in or around their housing estate or playing for their youth team in an ill-fitting kit, printed on glossy paper and inserted in the middle of the book to appease the reader's visual expectations. The narrative structure is largely linear with the exception, in some cases, of a prologue at the beginning that might entail an *in medias res* scene, teasing the reader straight into the crux of a dramatic, formative, perhaps even life-changing, moment within their life or footballing career that is returned to and elaborated on more extensively later.[3] There is seemingly little room for linguistic flair, novelistic nuance and, most importantly, an above-satisfactory contextual depth to the writing that could furnish the work with the desired texture to carry the detailed weight of a lived life.

In relation to the life stories represented within the ghostwritten autobiographies of Black British footballers in particular, it appears that the experiences of their lives are shaped to conform to the expectations of the typical football-fan reader, who, for a large part, is similar to the typical British football fan: white and male. They commonly invoke the familiar underdog narrative, and subsequently, are likely to contain anecdotal descriptions which suggest that playing football – from the early days in the park to reaching the professional status – served as an escape from an often troubled, unstable or even abusive home life and, more widely, the divisive feeling of being an 'outsider'. In Derek A. Bardowell's 2019 book *No Win Race*: *A Story of Belonging, Britishness and Sport*, which explores the author's relationship with sport as a Black man, he notes that 'in so many British people's eyes, we

[3] Examples of this technique can be seen in the work Paul McGrath's *Back from the Brink* and Leroy Rosenior's *"It's Only Banter"*.

[Black people] remain outsiders, visitors, not the ideal conception of Britishness or Englishness' (Bardowell 2019: 8). This story of Black British subjects cast as outsiders, not being fully accepted by society, has been translated into highly problematic representations of a Black footballing life in the so-called autobiographical publications.

In what Yellin refers to as the 'battlefields of self-determination' (Yellin 2020: 1), these publications not only fail to render the complex and intricate story of the subject's life but perpetuate diminishing stereotypes in the context of a wider culture where such detailed stories are already scarce. As Daniel Burdsey posits in his book *Racism and English Football: For Club and Country*, 'the reproduction of racist stereotypes about black bodies and minds in football has harmful consequences' (Burdsey 2021: 43). This is of particular concern for Black readers because, as Derek Owusu writes in the introduction to *SAFE: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*, 'if you have no access to the perspectives and thoughts of Black British males, you're forced to accept what popular media, books and movies tell you about who you are and how you see the world' (Owusu 2019: 4). Indeed, the role that these Black male autobiographies play in a wider ecology of British publishing is significant.

In 2020, Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente published a report on 'Rethinking "Diversity" in Publishing' in partnership with Goldsmiths, University of London, the writers' development agency Spread the Word, and *The Bookseller*. The findings of this groundbreaking academic study analysing 'how cultural production itself might disadvantage writers of colour' are relevant to the questions of self-representation, agency and othering that are under discussion in relation to Black British footballing autobiographies. Most straightforwardly, the report concludes that 'until the publishing industry diversifies its audience, writers of colour will always be "othered"' (Saha and van Lente 2020:12). It also addresses the consequences of their exceptional status within 'the core publishing industry […] set up essentially to cater for this one white reader' (Saha and van Lente 2020:12), while 'writers of colour find themselves having to *perform* their racial and ethnic identities in ways that conform to mainstream white, liberal views in order to get media exposure' (Saha and van Lente 2020: 23). While in many ways the ghostwritten works under discussion here conform to mainstream perceptions of Black male lives as marked by family breakdown, criminality and poverty, the performance of racialised identities is still in play and it remains concordant with the expectations of a white readership for whom the majority of published works are produced. As Saha and van

Lente comment, 'when we interviewed people that work in the promotion of a book – including jacket design, marketing, and publicity – it became apparent that they all shared a common understanding of their "core" audience: explicitly middle-class, implicitly white' (Saha and van Lente 2020: 22).

In this unapologetically personal genre, it may seem a reasonable expectation that, when compiled pragmatically and sincerely, the life story that is told will encompass the weightiness of narrating the experience of each footballer, encompassing their childhood, their relationships with their friends and family, and their career successes and pitfalls, as their inner thoughts are brought to the surface for all to read. However, in many ghostwritten autobiographical works relating to Black British footballers, there is little room for the genuine nuances of the Black experience which differ from the generalised racialised tropes or deviate significantly from the archetypal narrative of the footballer as personally troubled and disadvantaged that has now become commonplace. Rather, the ghostwritten autobiographies that are penned and published through an industry that is focused on white readers and markets, usually confirm narrow and negative life stories that neither redress the historical representational absence of Black British male lives nor advance understandings of complex lives represented with compassion.

In order to address this aporia between the idea, or the ideal, of autobiographies as narratives bearing the weight and complexities of individual lives and the replicated, generic story of Black male life adopted in the cluster of contemporary ghostwritten footballing autobiographies discussed here, I have chosen to pay attention to the lovelessness of these works. My aim is to prompt a discussion around a significant absence in these works and to give consideration to the cumulative effect of this genre in failing to represent the emotional depth or texture of Black male lives. In her book *all about love* (2000), bell hooks, a leading African American feminist and cultural theorist, discusses the pervasive lovelessness of contemporary society and the cost for individuals and communities. hooks begins from the acknowledgment that 'it is especially hard to speak of love when what we have to say calls attention to the fact that lovelessness is more common than love' (hooks 2000: xxvii). In this regard, hooks' work can usefully be read alongside that of the African American novelist and essayist James Baldwin whose attention to love as a tool of political as well as personal transformation remains relevant today. In a 1962 letter to *The New Yorker* Baldwin addressed

the contemporary moment of 'America's racial nightmare,' by emphasising the possibility of love and the deep rapport it offers in the face of seemingly intransigent divides: 'the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks […] must, *like lovers*, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others' (Baldwin 1998: 347 quoted in Butorac, emphasis mine).

In his 2018 article, 'Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and the Politics of Love,' Sean Kim Butorac pays thoughtful attention to Baldwin's call for love alongside his identification of whiteness as lovelessness. He argues that:

> Loving white people never precludes Baldwin from criticizing white people for what they have become: loveless. This lovelessness arises from the unexamined lives of those who profess racial innocence, and this historical detachment produces an embodied, sensual disconnect. Yet in framing whiteness as a condition of lovelessness, Baldwin also prescribes love as a way to resolve those pathologies. (Butorac 2018: 714)

For Baldwin, white lovelessness is rooted in the avoidance of the complication and density of Black lives, as he writes in his essay 'Everybody's Protest Novel': 'In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity – which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves – we are diminished and we perish' (Baldwin 1955: 11).

As Butorac also points out, there is an echo of Baldwin's call embedded in the twenty-first century Black Lives Matter movement which its co-founder Alicia Garza has described as 'grounded in love' (Fusion 2016). The ongoing absence of loving commitment to a shared humanity in the face of alienating racial typecasting is played out more visibly in acts of police brutality and institutionalised racism but it also informs the limits of artistic representation. Butorac notes how:

> Although love is fraught ground, black scholars and activists are already moving the public discourse in a more thoughtful direction. Speaking to "White America" as a child of "Socrates, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde," George Yancy has demanded,

> "*I want you to listen with love*. Well, at least try". (Butorac 2018: 710 emphasis original)

It is this same call for committed and conscious work, specifically here for writing that is both artistically and socially responsible to the ongoing damage enacted by negative and narrow racialisation, that I wish to make and that has informed my own creative representation of a Black male footballing life.

CHAPTER ONE: UNBELONGING

To understand the nature and impact of the racialised narratives that shape the presentation of Black British footballers in their ghostwritten autobiographies it is important to consider the wider historical context of unbelonging attendant on being Black in Britain, and in particular the exceptional pressures that are visited upon Black men and Black sportsmen.

Post-Windrush belonging

Since the landmark arrival of HMT Empire Windrush in 1948, which has been taken to inaugurate the era of post-war mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain, the tension between being Black and being accepted as British has been articulated in official and popular discourses to create a demonstrable sense of unbelonging for Black British citizens which has continued until the present day. As Labour MP David Lammy writes, seventy years after Windrush, 'it is the year 2018, which has revealed the grossest injustices towards the Windrush generation by the British state since the Imperial times: stories of unlawful deportation, detention and discrimination that denied the citizens of this country' (Lammy in Brinkhurst-Cuff 2019: xviii). Certainly, twenty-first century Britain has given the lie to any idea that post-Windrush Britain is inclusively postcolonial or post-racial in any meaningful way or that the condition of unbelonging experienced by Britain's Black subjects is a thing of the past. Indeed, in the contemporary moment, the external contexts forging the message of unbelonging can range from Brexit and the politically-charged campaigns led by controversial figures such as Tommy Robinson and Nigel Farage, to the associated growing popularity of right-wing parties in the UK, and the government's controversial policy on a 'hostile environment' for migrants - including those of the Windrush generation who have been illegally denied their rights to housing, healthcare and welfare. As Lammy details, for these British subjects, 'Theresa May's "hostile environment" judged them un-British, and declared that they belonged in countries that they hadn't seen in decades, if at all' (Lammy in Brinkhurst-Cuff 2019: xvii). Far-right political groups such as Reform UK, founded as the Brexit Party in 2018 and fronted by Nigel Farage, only catalysed divisions among British citizens. As Kenan Malik writes for the *Guardian*, 'Nigel Farage has a long history of playing to racist and reactionary themes' (Malik *Guardian* 2019).

It would also seem that even after decades of trying to assert themselves as British, Black people and ethnic minorities are often still the subject of derision and contempt from public figures, who frequently have an open platform to represent their exclusionary version of the nation. As Daniel Burdsey shows, the representation of Black people and Black culture is still subject to widespread abuse and ridicule in Britain today from figures held in high esteem whose expression of 'racism draws explicitly on colonial histories and other global locations through the denigration of Africa and African players. For instance, British entrepreneur Lord Sugar tweeted a crass photographic comparison between the Senegal men's team and vendors on a Marbella beachfront' (Burdsey 2021: 41). This blatant racism by a much-admired celebrity figure reinforces structures of privilege and prejudice and highlights the pervading racism that shapes the conditions and limits of belonging and recognition for many Black people living in contemporary Britain.

Such public examples of racism in the British media in recent years can range from overt gestures to micro-aggressions and collectively they imply that Black people, as Derek A. Bardowell observes, continue to 'remain the poor relations in British society' (Bardowell 2019: 7). The hierarchical social structure that designates Black people as inferior to their white counterparts and devalued in almost every way confirms Bardowell's argument that 'the reality for people of colour in Britain is that our skin tone is a barrier. It limits opportunities' (Bardowell 2019: 7). Subsequently, there is a pervading and persistent notion, one that has existed since at least the end of World War II, that Black people are never welcomed in Britain, but merely tolerated. In this context, it feels more significant than ever to present a fuller narration of Black people's experiences in Britain and to give attention to the continuing societal challenges and injustices that arise from persistent racialisation.

Although the Black British experience remains constantly shifting and pluralised, and is therefore impossible to singularly and succinctly define, Boakye posits in *Black, Listed* that 'being Black British is a tangible identity in as far as there are black people who are British' (Boakye 2019: 9). This simple and clear affirmation does not deny that being Black and British is subject to variation and change, but at the same time it demands attention to the specific lived realities of those who are both Black and British. In the broadest sense, the experience of being Black British has been shaped by an unshakable narrative of strife; a history of unbelonging and the struggle for literal, as well as metaphorical, accommodation in

what was often regarded as the 'mother-country' for those who were colonial subjects, ancestrally enslaved by Britain and yet still admonished to consider it their proper 'home'.

Claiming 'Black British' as an identity category became part of the struggle for recognition and rights in the late 1960s and 1970s, through the emergent voice of the second generation of Black migrants who, as Lammy affirms in his introduction to *Mother Country: Real Stories of the Windrush Children*, published in 2018, 'changed the shape of the country' by asserting themselves as living on their own terms in post-Windrush Britain (Lammy ed. Brinkhurst-Cuff 2018: xv). Yet, despite the passing of the first Race Discriminations Act in Parliament in the mid-1970s, 'Britain was still very much a divided nation' (Rees 2014: 15) and Black British citizens continued, and still continue, to bear the burden of societal-wide abuse, in terms of both systematic and individual racially-motivated mistreatment.

Recognising that race and gender are intersectional identities, and that Black women and men are therefore subject to differently inflected constructions of blackness, my focus here is on the specific manner and intensity with which Black men, and in particular Black male footballers, have been subjugated to discrimination and oppression in Britain. The collective pressures of these gendered and racialised identities have created an environment of social tension and vigilance for Black British men, as prominent podcaster, journalist and men's mental health advocate Alex Holmes observes in his 2021 book *Time to Talk: How Men Feel About Love, Belonging and Connection*. Holmes states that:

> To be a young man – in my case, a young Black man – in today's world is to persistently hold your breath and hope you can come up for air sometime soon amid all the unspoken pressures of what we are, and aren't, expected to be by those around us. How we should 'fit' into society, and how we should be, both physically and emotionally: the notions of being ever-strong, resilient and unbreakable. (Holmes 2021: 6).

These pre-determined characteristics and labels attributed to Black British men in the contemporary context can often be hard to shake off as they operate in an ideological terrain of representation that is not influenced or re-cast by the overwhelming evidence of very different lived realities for Black men in Britain. As Burdsey explains, 'living and acting

outside the white racial framing of black masculinity does not always change the slant or tenor of dominant portrayals' (Burdsey 2021: 92).

Moreover, Black British masculinity has been an identity shaped in extremes. It is commonly marked by its restrictions in terms of full acceptance and citizenship, by the assumptions around social marginality or 'exceptional' successes, by pervasive glass ceilings – which historically meant that professionally qualified migrants were forced to take menial jobs – by its construction within state and popular discourses as being 'resistant to authority', threatening and criminal and, on all these counts, met with popular prejudice and structural discrimination. Kwesi Owusu's *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader* (1999) offers a useful and rare theoretical platform for exploring what is signified by Black British Masculinity, which Claire Alexander admits has received very little attention to date in her essay in this collection (Alexander in Owusu 1999: 373). Alexander's mention of how recognition of 'the heterogeneity of black masculinity at an individual, private level' stands in contradiction to continued 'homogeneity of "black macho" at a public, "street level"' is helpful in identifying why individual differences are commonly missing and unaccounted for in ghostwritten autobiographies whereas frameworks supporting public prejudice and assumptions around collective similarities among Black British men are commonly found (Alexander in Owusu 1999: 375). While these works claim an inside knowledge of Black British male lives, they are seldom able to recognise or engage with Alexander's understanding of Black masculinity as 'an articulated response to structural inequality, enacting and subverting dominant definitions of power and control rather than standing in for them' or to give expression to 'the lived expressions of black masculinity [that are] complex and often contradictory' (Alexander in Owusu 1999: 376). When Alexander quotes from bell hooks, she acknowledges how impossible it is for positive and nuanced versions of Black masculinity to be seen: 'the portrait of black masculinity that emerges in this work perpetually constructs men as "failures", who are psychologically "fucked up", dangerous, violent sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfil their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context' (hooks in Owusu 1999: 375). While the ghostwritten autobiographies to be explored in this study look at men who are, or have been, largely successful in their role as professional footballers, these extreme and damaging constructions do still come into play.

This sense of being othered, of unbelonging, and the struggle to be fully accepted in Britain is not only a social construct projected onto Black men but also one that can be internalised to insidiously compromise their sense of place. In recent years, there have been several publications that respond to the call to reposition and to give serious attention to the Black British male experience. In his book, *Cool Britannia and Multi-Ethnic Britain: Uncorking the Champagne Supernova*, Jason Arday has argued for the importance of Britain's Black histories as a corrective to the myth of a liberal nation in which 'too often it is assumed that Britain is and always has been an inclusive space, tolerant of all ethnic difference' (Arday 2020: 7). Powerful personal histories that also evoke collective counter-histories to that of a convivial multi-cultural Britain can be found in several works by Black British men that support the investigation of masculinity central to my research. They often detail the tensions of racialised lives and the experiences of their families in navigating the most fundamental spaces of belonging: housing, employment and education. Taken collectively, these writers' non-fiction works articulate the lived experience of being a Black British male inhabiting racialised spaces within British society through the decades.

Caryl Phillips, the acclaimed Kittitian-Leeds writer offers a sobering account of how 'across the centuries British identity has been a primarily racially constructed concept' (Phillips 2001: 272) in his essay 'The Pioneers: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain', published in his essay collection *A New World Order*. Phillips reflects on the lives of that first generation who, like his own parents, migrated in 1958 from St Kitts to Leeds, coming to the 'motherland' full of hopes and aspirations, and a determination to work and to flourish. Yet, he narrates how 'despite the evidence of the British passport in the hand of the Caribbean migrant, the nation could certainly agree on one thing. A black man could never be a British man' (Phillips 2001: 273). For Phillips' generation, growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, resistance to the racist state was not an option: 'it was clear to us that a British future involved not only kicking back when kicked, but continuing to kick until a few doors opened and things changed' (Phillips 2001: 276). This same experience of growing up as Black man on a council estate in the north-east of England in the 1970s and 1980s is also evoked by historian and television presenter David Olusoga, who describes his childhood experience of being made to 'feel profoundly unwelcome in Britain' (Olusoga 2017: xv). It is the prefixed adjective 'unwelcome' that is most striking, as it appears to strengthen the pervading notion that Black people in Britain should know their place as outsiders and not expect to be

accepted. At times, as Olusoga explains, the treatment could turn violent and 'almost every black or mixed-race person of my generation has a story of racial violence to tell' (Olusoga 2017: xv). In the mid-1980s, while in his early teens, Olusoga and his family, including his younger brother and grandmother, experienced the drive to unbelonging acutely as they 'were driven out of [their] home by a sustained campaign of almost nightly attacks' (Olusoga 2017: xvii).

Aside from the persistent everyday difficulty of being Black and British that has existed for many generations, an existence burdened by entrenched racialised belief systems as well as overt acts of oppression and wide-ranging forms of abuse, it appears the fraught experience of being Black and British is further intensified in the world of sport. Ben Carrington's essay 'Double Consciousness and the Black British Athlete', also in Owusu's *Black British Culture and Society*, addresses the 'problematic and complex positioning of Black athletes within contemporary Britain', with a focus on Linford Christie and Frank Bruno (Carrington in Owusu 1999: 133). Carrington argues that their double consciousness stems from 'being called upon to represent both "the nation" and "the race"' and yet finding that Blackness and Britishness are commonly positioned as mutually exclusive (Carrington in Owusu 1999: 133). Carrington concludes his extended analysis of how these two figures were represented by the British media by stating that 'Black athletes offer a powerful symbolic challenge to contemporary cultural racisms, by demonstrating that there is Black in the Union Jack. However, what is missing is any conscious attempt to radically redefine what constitutes Britishness itself, and to link such critiques to wider questions of social exclusion and disadvantage. The challenge facing contemporary Black athletes is how to articulate a notion of Black Britishness that allows them to embrace their Blackness, and at the same time contribute to a new model of what it means to be British today' (Owusu 1999: 152). Yet, while Carrington's essay seems to put the emphasis on athletes to tell the truth of their own story more powerfully, I will argue that the genre of the football autobiography exerts a great deal of pressure on the opportunities for such truths to be told and heard.

Writing more specifically of football, in his essay 'Leeds United, Life and Me,' Caryl Phillips writes about his childhood love of the game that baffled his cricket-loving father and how his loyalty to his cherished club was tested by the racism he experienced as a 'black Leeds fan during the 1960s and 1970s' (Phillips 2001: 299): 'The same people who would hug you

when Leeds scored (which we often did), would shout 'nigger' and 'coon' should the opposing team have the temerity to field a player of the darker hue' (Phillips 2001: 299). The heady mix of memories that Leeds United evokes for Phillips leads him to propose his team and his experience as a football supporter as a telling portal on his life: 'they are a mirror in which you'll see reflected the complexity that is your life' (Phillips 2001: 301). Remembering when he watched West Ham United's Clyde Best play away at Leeds United's Elland Road, Phillips speaks of his 'palpable discomfort as [he] watched [the] Bermudan striker, Clyde Best, on his annual visit to Leeds United [...] coming in for some particularly vicious stick' (Phillips 2001: 299). Best himself also recalls this same abuse in his 2016 autobiography *The Acid Test*, admitting that 'the south of the country was slightly more cosmopolitan and tolerant. It was always the teams up north that were the worst offenders – like Leeds, for instance' (Best 2016: 71).[4] Probably unbeknown to Best at the time, he had a positive impact on some of the spectators, including a young Benjamin Zephaniah, who recalls 'being mesmerised by Clyde Best' and feeling 'a little guilty because he was on the other team' (*Guardian* 2021) while watching Aston Villa at Villa Park in the early 1970s.

Black British footballing histories

Given the ongoing explicit racism that players face today, the contemporary moment presents an important opportunity to reassess the past and present of the Black experience in Britain in terms of how wider societal discontent filters down onto the football field. As Douglas Hartmann notes, 'the sporting arena has the potential to resist or reinforce inequalities in a dynamic environment and therefore becomes a useful litmus test of cultural cohesion and togetherness for most societies' (Hartmann in Hylton 2010: 337). In the 1980s, during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as prime minister, the rise of football hooliganism on the terraces is understood to have mirrored the wider social disillusionment and fragmentation which resulted in and from widescale unemployment due to the decline of Britain's industrial sectors during that decade. The recent, targeted racial abuse of Jadon Sancho, Marcus Rashford and Bukayo Saka following their penalty kick misses in the final of the Euro 2020[5]

[4] For the most part, it appears that the increased presence of Black footballers playing in the highest echelons of the English game in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was tolerated more in England's larger cities such as London and Birmingham, with significant multi-ethnic populations, than some of the Northern cities.

[5] This championship took place in the summer of 2021 due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Championships may similarly be seen to reflect a flashpoint in the face of heightened political tensions in Britain, this time over questions of inclusion in a post-Brexit nation.

In order to contextualise the racialised limitations facing Black British footballers today that feed into the ghostwritten accounts of their lives, it is significant to note how this oppressive weight has been felt for centuries by many talented Black sportsmen. These include Bill Richmond (1763-1829), a boxer and Covent Garden publican, whose prowess emerged 'in the era of the slave trade,'[6] through Arthur Wharton (1865-1930) and Walter Tull (1881-1918) whose footballing talents were both noted and yet inadequately recognised on account of racial bias, to Jack Leslie (1901-1988), whose distinguished footballing career with Plymouth Argyle was only properly recognised decades after his death. All these figures have now attracted critical attention, deepening the understanding of how racialisation has framed and often threatened footballing success for talented Black players. This cumulative narrative over three centuries is a demonstration of how entrenched the assumptions around Black sporting lives in Britain have become.

In his 2009 essay 'Black Terror: Bill Richmond's Revolutionary Boxing', T.J. Desch Obi discusses how 'Richmond was dubbed '"the Black Terror," a cognomen that also captured the general social horror that much of the public perceived in the social ascendancy of this black man' (Obi 2009: 107). Born in New York City's Staten Island in 1763, Richmond rose from slavery to become the first Black professional boxer, having 'reluctantly entered the world of prizefighting' to quickly become 'the first African-American prizefighter with a series of victories over much larger and more experienced English pugilists' (Obi 2009: 101). His success in England came at a time when many Black people 'were being sold on auction blocks and most formed the lowest segment of society' (Obi 2009: 108). As an example of the treatment he received as a talented athlete, it is reported that Richmond 'often fought off racist attacks by much larger Englishman […] In 1804, for example, Frank Meyers, known as the York Bully, called Richmond a "black devil" and accosted him for walking with a white woman' (Obi 2009: 108). As Obi continues, 'his ascendance in boxing presented a challenge not only to notions of racial hierarchy and English nationalism but also to presumptions about fighting styles' (Obi 2009: 108).

[6] See Paul Edwards and James Walvin's *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (1983).

Arthur Wharton's life and career was brought to greater prominence by Phil Vasili's 1998 book *The First Black Footballer, Arthur Wharton, 1865-1930* which offers a startling account of a Black footballer's life at the turn of the twentieth century. In his detailed chronicling of the Ghanaian-born Wharton's career, Vasili shares the view of the time that Wharton deserved an England cap because of his impressive footballing displays. However, as Vasili concludes, 'we are left with the impression that the primary reason Arthur was not selected was antagonism to the pigmentation of his skin and the curliness of his hair' (Vasili 1998: 77). According to Vasili:

> Arthur owed a debt, as do all sports people, to those who fought to improve the lives of Black and working people […] it was activity by individuals and groups, such as Chartists and trade unions in general, that won improved social and economic conditions which enabled men and to a much lesser extent, women, to pursue a living in sport. (Vasili 1998: 198)

While these stories of solidarity and anti-racism are important to record alongside those of racial abuse, the historical continuity of hostility and exclusion experienced by Black sporting figures in Britain remains clear.

It is telling that acclaimed author and essayist Caryl Phillips turns to the story of Walter Tull, Britain's 'first black outfield soccer player' (Phillips 2001: 265) when tracing the deep history of Britain's racism. Tull had worked his passage from Barbados as a ship's carpenter in 1876 and was still in an orphanage when he began to play for Clapton FC and was spotted by Tottenham Hotspur where he was signed in 1908. Sadly, after becoming the first Black officer to command white troops in the British Army, Tull died in combat aged twenty-nine during World War I. Although, as Phillips notes in his essay 'The Pioneers: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain,' Tull was noted for footballing talent, his career was blighted by racial abuse and, likely due to this, he was held in the reserves until he was signed by Northampton Town in 1911. Despite his remarkable life and skills, Tull was only visible as a Black man on the football pitch and, as Phillips remarks, 'was subjected to racial chanting and monkey noises, precisely the same type of abuse that is still showered on players today' (Phillips 2001: 266).

While Jack Leslie, born at the turn of the twentieth century and signed to Plymouth Argyle in 1921, did appear to be given the recognition his talents merited when he was 'picked for England' in 1925, it was 'only for the offer to be withdrawn because of belated objections to his colour by members of the FA unaware of his ethnicity' (Vasili 1998: 76). It took a lengthy campaign for Leslie to be given proper acknowledgement and in October 2022, almost a century after his dismissal from the national squad, the FA finally awarded Leslie a posthumous honorary cap, thirty-five years after his death. This officially made him 'the first black player to receive an England call-up' (*Guardian*, 2022). A commemorative statue of Leslie now also stands outside Plymouth Argyle's stadium, Home Park.

In addition to recovery scholarship that has restored the life stories and professional legacies of significant Black British footballing figures, there have been a range of publications that pay scholarly attention to the racialised culture of football in the era of the modern game. Back, Crabbe and Solomos' 2001 study *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity and Multiculture in the English Game* historicises 'the phenomenon of racism in football' that became 'a subject of widespread concern in the late 1970s and 1980s' (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 2001: 21). At a time when an increasing number of Black footballers were emerging from the margins of society to play top-level football for club and country, they comment on how:

> Groups such as the National Front were regularly seen selling their newspapers and magazines outside football grounds. But interest in the issue was also partly related to the increasing presence of black players amongst the ranks of professional footballers during the period since the 1970s. With the emergence of black players at all levels of football, phenomena such as racist chanting and abuse directed at them became common at many football grounds. (Back, Crabbe, Solomos 2001: 21)

Indeed, racial abuse from the terraces at football matches in Britain could not then and cannot now be separated from a wider discriminatory climate often cultivated by government policy and the systemic racism of institutions from the police to universities that continue to discriminate against Black people across British society.

Emy Onuora's 2015 book *Pitch Black: The Story of Black British Footballers,* featuring interviews with more than thirty Black footballers, also confirms that 'throughout the 1970s, black players were routinely subjected to the vilest racist abuse imaginable. From the terraces, black players were routinely subjected to monkey noises and racist chanting' (Onuora 2015: x). This abuse and its lasting impact are registered from the player's perspective by Clyde Best in his autobiography *The Acid Test,* when he notes how he will 'never forget going to Everton and hearing perpetual monkey chants' (Best 2015: xi). Bardowell discusses how 'Black players in the eighties were not considered 'true' Englishman' (Bardowell 2019: 133) even as they continued to join the top divisions of the English game in greater numbers. For example, 'West Ham had been the first top-flight club to field three black players at the same time when Clyde Best, Ade Coker, and Clive Charles turned out for the Hammers in April 1972 for a game against Tottenham' (Onuora 2015: 7), forming an historic trifecta of top Black talent at the highest level of the game. However, this greater presence in the English game did not lead to greater acceptance, and Black players representing either their club or country were subject to regular acts of racial hatred. As Onuora notes, 'routine racist abuse from opponents was commonplace' (Onuora 2015: xi). Sometimes the racial hostility was extreme, as Bardowell details, with some aggrieved supporters making death threats, as best exemplified when striker Cyrille Regis 'received a bullet in the post when he had first been selected to play for England in 1982' (Bardowell 2019: 134).

Moreover, as essayist Akala has addressed, very often the mistreatment of Black footballers, which has taken various forms down the decades, has been dismissed as 'banter' and an insalubrious aspect of the game that should be shrugged off without too much complaint from the victim or punishment by the authorities: 'Black players were expected to accept racial "banter" without having a "chip on their shoulder" about it' (Akala 2018: 102). There seems to be a pervading idea that the problem of racial abuse lay with the Black footballer for not being tough enough to take what some might consider as a joke, and not with the perpetrator of the often-malicious jibes. This notion of 'banter' in the footballing sphere appears to be a prominent euphemism to mitigate the serious nature of racially motivated verbal abuse aimed towards Black footballers down the decades; it even gives the title to former professional footballer Leroy Rosenior's autobiography *"It's Only Banter"*, ghostwritten by Leo Moynihan. Throughout the book, Rosenior details several occasions when he experienced

racism on his journey to becoming a professional footballer, and the abuse he suffered playing the game. He ultimately concludes that 'football's fossil-like argument that offensive behaviour is just *friendly* banter is starting to wear thin' (Rosenior 2017: 252).

Despite many players overcoming regular torrents of abuse and general racialised prejudice simply on account of being a Black person on the biggest stage of British society, as Onuora reports: 'the first group of black British footballers had struggled to break down the stereotypes that had been foisted upon them and had challenged the perceived notions about them' (Onuora 2015: 268). Crude stereotypical attitudes prevailed through which 'black players were admired for their strength, speed and flair, but also denigrated for their lack of intelligence, application and courage and their inability to play in cold weather' (Onuora 2015: xii). Jamaican-born John Barnes, who became a figurehead for Black footballers in the English game, having made his debut for Watford in 1981, and his England debut in 1983 (as only the seventh Black player to become an England international), may be an exception. As Onuora writes, 'Barnes broke down barriers for both club and country and was a trailblazer' (Onuora 2015: 7). Throughout his career, Barnes adopted a stoic stance to the abuse and racial mistreatment he received from the terraces while playing for Watford, Liverpool, Newcastle United and on international duty for England, helped no doubt by his 'upbringing in a military family [which] meant […] any complaints about racist abuse would have been given short shrift. He was always unmoved by the racist abuse he received, which was just as well because he got a lot of it' (Onuora 215: 125). Despite the toxicity that plagued his playing career, 'his impact on the black community in Liverpool and beyond was palpable […] After playing for Liverpool, he would go on to play for Newcastle and Charlton and he became the first black manager in Scottish football when he managed Celtic' (Onuora 215: 129). Barnes also still managed to win just under eighty caps for his country, despite regular questioning of his commitment to the national cause by certain sections of the England fanbase and media, owing to the fact he was born in Jamaica. Now one of the most eloquent voices on the question of race and discrimination in football and British society, Barnes' 2021 book draws on his personal experiences and astute analysis of societal inequalities to tell *The Uncomfortable Truth About Racism*.

As these recent studies and interviews confirm, Black footballers in Britain have always been constrained by damaging stereotypes that have undoubtedly affected how they have been

perceived and have perhaps ultimately impacted the success and longevity of their careers. Even in the so-called privileged position of being a professional footballer, Black men have been consistently 'othered' in British society and made to feel by many that they do not belong, confirming the already entrenched status of racialised discourses linked to ideas of social exclusion. If, as Burdsey asserts, 'English football has been arguably the foremost popular cultural sphere in which ideologies and discourses around race, racism and immigration have been both expressed and resisted' (Burdsey 2021: 1), then more recent incidents are also worth discussing. In 2011, match footage emerged of then Queens Park Rangers defender Anton Ferdinand seemingly being racially abused by Chelsea and England captain John Terry on the pitch during a Premier League fixture. Even though Ferdinand did not initially hear Terry's alleged comments during the game, the Chelsea centre-back was seen on camera allegedly mouthing a highly offensive racial slur. Despite apparently damning video evidence, Terry denied the claim and even used his Chelsea teammate Ashley Cole as part of his defence. As Hylton reports, 'Cole's blackness was used skilfully by then England captain Terry, the media and others who in this case privileged the voice of a Black sportsperson in a case of racism. In this case of racism, the white captain of England and Chelsea, endorsed a Black face who was voluntarily contradicting accusations of White racism' (Hylton 2018: 19). Terry received a paltry four-game ban and a £220,000 fine from the FA. As of 2021, following a 2020 documentary that Ferdinand made for the BBC called "*Football, Racism and Me*", 'John Terry insists he has reached out to Anton Ferdinand regarding the allegation […] but says his efforts have been spurned' (Sky Sports, 2020).

In March 2019, England played away to Montenegro in a UEFA Euro qualifying match and during that fixture, many of England's Black players were subjected to racist chanting from sections of the home supporters. Post-match, Montenegro was duly fined by UEFA for their fans' actions and ordered to play their next home fixture behind closed doors. In response to the stadium-wide abuse, England's left back on the night, Danny Rose, went on record to say that he felt it was a 'bit shocking but there's not much I can do now. I just hope I don't ever have to play there again' (Pitts *Guardian* 2019). The tone of Rose's words and his desire not to want to play again in a 'developed' European country like Montenegro highlight the ongoing presence and impact of racism in the modern game and the public hostility a Black footballer playing at the highest level still has to endure. Rose continued by stating that, owing to the targeted abuse in Montenegro, he 'can't wait to see the back of football' (ibid).

Also playing that night was Manchester City winger Raheem Sterling who, when asked later to reflect on the racism he had experienced on the football field, commented, 'we're trying, not just me, to make a change that in 10 years' time younger players won't have to think about a match and dare to be abused because the fans at that stadium will know what the consequences will be' (Pitts *Guardian* 2019). Sterling's comments alarmingly echo the thoughts expressed by Clyde Best when he was subjected to racial abuse on the football field several decades earlier: 'I always tried to remember what my dad told me: I was playing for those who were to come after me' (Best 2016: 103). However, even as recently as September 2021, Black players representing the England national team were still being subjected to horrific racial abuse. During a World Cup qualifier in the Hungarian capital of Budapest, 'sporadic monkey chants [were] heard from various areas of the Puskas Arena directed at England's Raheem Sterling and Jude Bellingham' (Sky Sports 2021). The players were even booed by fans when 'taking a knee'[7] prior to kick-off. Hungary were sanctioned by having to play their next home World Cup qualifier behind closed doors and were ordered to 'pay a fine of 200,000 Swiss francs (£158,000) as punishment' (*Guardian* 2021).

While the racism faced by Black players has not changed, the demographic of the national squad has. In the 2018 World Cup in Russia, England defied many people's expectations by reaching the semi-finals of the competition for the first time since Italia 90. But aside from their match-winning performances on the pitch 'something much more important, sociologically, gripped the nation's attention: discussions about race and multiculture. Out of the squad of 23 players, just over half were black or mixed-race' (Burdsey 2021: 65) and 'the number of black male professional footballers in England is greater now than at any other time in history' (Burdsey 2021: 38). More than merely the composition of a national football team, the England squad has been taken as a sign of a changing Britain by essayist Akala in his book of that year, *Natives*, which observes that 'the nation has just had to get used to an England football team that is half black, and if current youth team trends are anything to go by, set to get "blacker and blacker" into the future' (Akala 2018: 107).

[7] The act of 'taking the knee' was observed by the majority of players, managers and officials before every Premier League and EFL game for the 2020-2021 season. It followed the campaign by American football athlete Colin Kaepernick in 'protest against police brutality and racial injustice in America' in 2015 (*Guardian* 2021).

Despite the composition of the national side, racism is still a dominant issue within the sphere of the so-called 'beautiful game', even at the highest level, and creates a damaging personal context for the world's best players who are expected to play football for their respective clubs, be the best on the field and, in the face of abuse and racial injustices, still keep quiet. Indeed, in some quarters, there is still an idea that racism in the English game either does not exist or is not as serious an issue as some people, Black or otherwise, suggest that it to be. There is the suggestion that 'racism, recognised primarily as incidents of banana-throwing, monkey gestures and insults by supporters towards black players, was consequently relegated to a discrete and increasingly distant past' (Burdsey 2021: 3). This denial, by individuals and organisations alike, is an overt example of the systemic racism that exists today within the footballing sphere. It is clear from the examples above that not only do these unsavoury incidents still occur, but that they are also often exacerbated by social media. Furthermore, as Burdsey argues:

> The racialised socio-political climate in the UK at the moment – namely Brexit, the government's self-proclaimed "hostile environment" around immigration, the Windrush Scandal, responses to Black Lives Matter and widespread racially motivated hate crime – [and] provide a compelling and timely context for exploring the connections between race and this [footballing] aspect of popular culture. (Burdsey 2021: 21)

The treatment of Black British footballers online

In recent years, racial abuse has found a new platform on social media. The profiling of footballers and fans on Twitter and Instagram in particular has created a culture of greater media visibility and more behind-the-scenes action but it has also exacerbated the negative side effect of Black footballers being subjected to very public abuse, often on their own personal platforms. In this way, social media has expanded and amplified the racialised spaces within British culture that Black footballers must constantly negotiate in their professional lives. As with other modes of representation, social media both shapes and is shaped by wider cultural discourses and norms, and for Kevin Hylton, the current political climate has legitimised discriminatory views such that, 'post-Trump and post-Brexit, more people are willing to reveal their prejudices and biases without sugaring the pill' (Hylton 2018: 34). This use of social media as an informal and often insulting correspondence

between fan and footballer is interesting in the context of Black British footballing life stories as it offers a large data set of examples of the written form being used to abuse and mischaracterise a Black footballer, often in the aftermath of a bad performance on the pitch.

Related to the increased visibility around footballing lives and a somewhat voyeuristic desire on the part of the public, there has been a significant rise in football-related fly-on-the-wall docuseries programmes on streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime and Netflix, including *All or Nothing* (featuring Manchester City in 2018, Tottenham Hotspur in 2020 and Arsenal in 2022) and Sunderland's *Till I Die* (first aired in 2018). This style of programme offers modern-day football fans visual access into the lives of these demi-god sportsmen whom they often follow feverishly through the ubiquitous medium of social media. Apps such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat mean that anybody with an internet connection can essentially have access to behind-the-scenes footballing activities off the football pitch (and even on it, as Italian international Mario Ballotelli demonstrated in 2019, when he celebrated his goal for Marseille in France's Ligue 1 by taking out his phone and recording an Instagram Live video). However, as the gap between fan and footballer seemingly narrows with the rise of social media and the popularity of the aforementioned access-all-areas television series, the risk of increased hostility widens with new platforms opening for racial abuse. The start of the 2019-2020 Premier League season in particular saw a marked rise in abuse of Black footballers on social media. Notable names such as Chelsea's Tammy Abraham and Manchester United's Marcus Rashford and Paul Pogba were subjected to racist abuse on social media following matches, so much so that 'the spate of abusive posts prompted anti-discrimination campaigners Kick It Out to call for "decisive action"' (Pitts *Guardian* 2019). While rather anodyne high-profile anti-racist campaigns such as Kick It Out, No Room for Racism, and the act of taking the knee before games are a reminder of the persistent racism within the game, they appear to be ineffective in stopping the continued abuse of Black footballers online.

Since then, and particularly during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, Marcus Rashford has emerged as a critical spokesperson for large swathes of society in his campaign to continue free school meals over the school holidays and launching a book club for disadvantaged children in April 2021, among other philanthropic endeavours. Despite his work for marginalised communities across the country, Rashford and a number of his England and

Manchester United teammates continue to be demonised on social media platforms. In 2021, Manchester United footballers Axel Tuanzebe, Anthony Martial and Fred, as well as Rashford himself, were routinely subjected to racial abuse online, including after their unexpected Premier League defeat at Old Trafford to bottom-side Sheffield United in February 2021, with Rashford calling out this behaviour and telling Sky Sports that 'online abuse should be easy to stop' (Sky Sports, 2021).

The crude use of social media to abuse Black footballers online was brought to the fore once more following England's defeat to Italy in the final of the Euro 2020 Championships at Wembley. As a result of penalty kick misses by Jadon Sancho, Marcus Rashford and, crucially, Bukayo Saka, the three young Black footballers were subject to torrents of abuse online, including comments containing monkey and banana emojis, posts using the 'n' word and calls for Saka to 'go back to Nigeria' (*Daily Mail* 2021). The latter being an example of, as Burdsey asserts, racism that 'draws explicitly on colonial histories and other global locations' (Bursdey 2020: 41). Rashford's response, posted on his Instagram page, was characteristically dignified and candid:

> I don't even know where to start and I don't even know how to put into words how I'm feeling at this exact time. I've had a difficult season, I think that's been clear for everyone to see and I probably went into that final with a lack of confidence. I've always backed myself for a penalty but something didn't feel quite right. During the long run up I was saving myself a bit of time and unfortunately the result was not what I wanted. I felt as though I had let my teammates down. I felt as if I'd let everyone down. A penalty was all I'd been asked to contribute for the team. I can score penalties in my sleep so why not that one? It's been playing in my head over and over since I struck the ball and there's probably not a word to quite describe how it feels. Final. 55 years. 1 penalty. History. All I can say is sorry. I wish it had of gone differently. Whilst I continue to say sorry I want to shoutout my teammates. This summer has been one of the best camps I've experienced and you've all played a role in that. A brotherhood has been built that is unbreakable. Your success is my success. Your failures are mine. I've grown into a sport where I expect to read things written about myself. Whether it be the colour of my skin, where I grew up, or, most recently, how I decide to spend my time off the pitch. I can take critique of my performance all

> day long, my penalty was not good enough, it should have gone in but I will never apologise for who I am and where I came from. I've felt no prouder moment than wearing those three lions on my chest and seeing my family cheer me on in a crowd of 10s of thousands. I dreamt of days like this. The messages I've received today have been positively overwhelming and seeing the response in Withington had me on the verge of tears. The communities that always wrapped their arms around me continue to hold me up. I'm Marcus Rashford, 23 year old, black man from Withington and Wythenshawe, South Manchester. If I have nothing else I have that.
>
> For all the kind messages, thank you. I'll be back stronger. We'll be back stronger.
>
> MR10

As author Johny Pitts asserts, 'this generation of black players has tackled racism head on' (Pitts *Guardian* 2019). This is exemplified when, following the racist abuse that ensued after the Euro 2020 final, England central defender Tyrone Mings responded to home secretary Priti Patel's condemnation of the racist abuse faced by his teammates, after she had previously called players taking the knee 'gesture politics'. As the *Guardian* reports, 'responding to Patel's statement on Twitter, the England player Tyrone Mings said: "You don't get to stoke the fire at the beginning of the tournament by labelling our anti-racism message as 'Gesture Politics' and then pretend to be disgusted when the very thing we're campaigning against, happens"' (*Guardian* 2021).

However, footballers, like Mings and Rashford, who are brave enough to respond openly to the online abuse they regularly receive are never safe from a backlash, even though 'players' testimonies add an important experimental component to our knowledge […] in particular, they illuminate the effects of some of the more structural and systemic forms of racism, together with individual and collective ways of resisting them' (Burdsey 2021: 9). In many ways, Black footballers' response to racial abuse on social media, usually found in the form of a Twitter or Instagram post, is an initial form of autobiography, as it is their words, their story, being read by the public. As poet Benjamin Zephaniah asserts, 'in the past footballers couldn't talk about anything apart from the games they played […] Now footballers have a voice and a platform. They aren't taking injustice anymore and they're willing to stand up'

(*Guardian* 2021). In September 2021, it was announced that pupils studying AQA Media Studies will be able to 'learn about Rashford's online presence and his communications on social media platforms, and the way in which they have successfully engaged followers' (*Guardian* 2021) as part of the reading material for their course. Johny Pitts suggests, in his same article in 2019, that 'footballers could use such platforms [social media] to draw people into discussing bigger issues, such as the Windrush scandal and the Grenfell Tower tragedy. They can highlight the connection between the hostile environment in football stadiums and the hostile environment imposed by the government towards black communities' (Pitts *Guardian* 2019). Rashford's first-person statements online in particular, provide a powerful example of the positive influence the direct words of a Black footballer can have on wider society and future generations – perhaps reflecting on what could be achieved if life stories could be told without the unhelpful and loveless mediation of the white ghostwriter who is susceptible to ubiquitous racialised constructions.

While the diminishing distance between footballers' lives and the interests of the general public is perhaps most evident from social media's hunger for behind-the-scenes material, the publication of the footballers' autobiographies also responds to the same desire to 'know' and judge the life off the pitch and is also vulnerable to the same damaging, racialised assumptions and assertions as the next chapter will explore. Indeed, there is arguably a concerning correlation between the racialised constructions being broadcast by fans online and the way in which the shape of the autobiography is used to mischaracterise, parody or poorly articulate the lives of Black British footballers. As it stands, the monkey emojis, derogatory comments and slurs aimed at Black footballers on social media, alongside the problematic depictions of their lives and careers within their ghostwritten autobiographies, means that there are very few examples of the Black British footballer being portrayed in a positive light. Burdsey offers a sobering summary of the context in which the autobiographies I will be discussing have emerged:

> The social tale of modern English professional football is certainly rich and varied, and it contains a range of subplots that point towards potential happy endings; but it is also a narrative in which the menace of racism has always been, and continues to be, an incorrigible protagonist. (Burdsey 2021: 1)

Indeed, before analysing the ghostwritten autobiographical works of Black British footballers in detail, it is important to acknowledge how the established popular versions of Black British masculinity discussed above continue to shape these stories, generating diminishing templates from a dominant racialised and gendered narrative. This is especially relevant given that ghostwriters who do not share their subject's experience and background may, ironically, look to these wider cultural narratives in their attempts to seamlessly embed the 'Black experience' into their writing and to give their story more authority and authenticity to achieve the desired fullness. Yet it would appear that those writing these works have not researched Black British male experience, as captured in the works of Hall, Phillips and Owusu etc., and cannot include details that could furnish the work with the texture needed to evoke a sense of authenticity.

As I will later discuss, in almost all of these published works of footballing lives, there is a striking absence of any critical awareness concerning the range and heterogeneity of the Black British experience, or a willingness to challenge dominant stereotypes of Black British masculinity. Rather, these autobiographies that relate the lives of Black British footballers show a distinct lack of what I would call 'the unremarkable': the seemingly trivial details and life events that represent the fullness of human experience and follow Woolridge's ideal of autobiographical works in which 'the model professional must also stress his "ordinariness"' (Woolridge 2008: 629). In their place, we find often generic anecdotes which conform to the cultural expectations of the football-fan reader, and thereby substitute complex truths for easy entertainment, confirming the dominant cultural projections and racialised stereotypes rather than challenging these.

In 2023, these cultural narratives remain laden with misconceived ideas of what it means to be a Black British citizen. The complications of Brexit and a clear rise in the emergence of the far right has yet again curtailed the fulfilment of a responsible and meaningfully inclusive national culture that was hoped for when seminal figures like Caryl Phillips were writing about their experience of living in Britain as Black men a few decades previously. The difficulty of calling Britain 'home' remains because, as Phillips reflects from his own experience, history has taught him that 'the rules will change. The goalposts will be moved' (Phillips 2001: 308). Yet, while the context of an inclusive Britain has become harder to imagine, the lives of footballing role models have gained currency. In recent years, owing to

the rise in the genre's marketing potential, there is an increasing trend in releasing more than one autobiography during a footballer's career. As of 2023, for example, former Manchester United stars Wayne Rooney and Rio Ferdinand have released a combined total of seven autobiographies, epitomising the growing interest in uncovering the behind-the-scenes activities of footballers away from, and beyond, the football field. Unless the negative myths of Black British masculinity stop being overlaid on these stories of individual, heterogeneous sporting success, there is a danger that footballing autobiographies become a vehicle for entrenching negatively racialised narratives and confirming the unbelonging of Black British men, rather than celebrating extraordinary but complex Black British lives.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LOOK FOR LOVE

Despite the increased visibility of a footballer's life as a result of the ubiquitous presence of social media in the contemporary climate, the ghostwritten autobiography is still an integral platform for football fans, young and old, to gain more detailed insights into the life journey of the central subject. There is an expectation that the reading of an autobiography is likely to include lesser known details of the subject's childhood, and present the route taken by the footballer to becoming a professional sports figure, giving time and space to present more enlightening aspects of their life off the pitch and the contextual details about their friends and family that shaped the person that they have become known and, in most cases, celebrated for. As is expected from a popular genre, the quality of the writing itself within the ghostwritten football autobiography is immensely varied, but it is distinguished from the novel by a consistent and marked absence of descriptive texture and the lack of literary richness to furnish the work with the characteristics that help the reader authentically inhabit the world being described beyond the presentation of the cold hard facts of the life story. Within these works, there is often an overreliance on basic tropes and dominant perceptions of a Black man's life instead of attempts to delve deeper, beyond the surface level of the subject, to uncover more illuminating and frank discoveries that begin to fashion a fuller portrait of the footballer at the centre. Yet, while these works may not yield readily to the close reading skills of literary analysis, the publications still arguably merit close exploration as it is only by carefully reading across a range of such works, covering several decades, that the template of the Black British male footballer that they structure and collectively endorse moves into focus.

This chapter will discuss how the template structure of this genre repeatedly foregrounds particular elements of the footballing life story, namely upbringing, education, relationships, racism and selfhood, also paying close attention to the ways in which the dominant and diminishing narratives of Black masculinity are inscribed into these stock representations. It is in its repeated patterning that this genre can also be seen to contribute to the representational practice of promoting the continued 'homogeneity of "black macho" at a public, "street level"' and downplaying individual differences and 'the heterogeneity of black masculinity at an individual, private level' (Alexander in Owusu 1999: 375) that Claire

Alexander explores in her article on Black British masculinity. In other words, although ostensibly dedicated to representing a singular life, works within this genre tend to play up to pre-existing stereotypes of Black British masculinity to confirm and continue a negative uniformity rather than exploring individual difference and particularity.

Although a range of publications relating to the lives of Black footballers are referenced in this chapter, in seeking to explore common themes and the templating prevalent within Black footballers autobiographies, I focus on a cluster of four recently published accounts: Clyde Best's *The Acid Test* (2016), Adebayo Akinfenwa's *The Beast: My Story* (2017), Leroy Rosenior's *"It's Only Banter"* (2017), and Jermaine Pennant's *Mental: Bad Behaviour, Ugly Truths and the Beautiful Game* (2018). This smaller sample provides a clearer picture of how four very different Black British (or British-based) footballers, who largely played at different times, are depicted in their so-called life stories within publications released in a short and contemporary timeframe. Although Clyde Best was born in Bermuda, my analysis predominantly focuses on his Black British experience, and Best is widely recognised as being one of the first, and subsequently one of the most celebrated, Black footballers to play at the top-level of English football. He spent the most productive years of his career playing in East London with West Ham United in the late 1960s and early 1970s, regularly lining up alongside World Cup winning footballers Geoff Hurst and Bobby Moore, and these notable successes mean that his ghostwritten autobiography merits analysis. In particular, the racial abuse Best experienced provides a useful and interesting account from which to compare the treatment of Black footballers on the pitch and on the page today. The second ghostwritten autobiography under consideration is that of London-born Adebayo Akinfenwa. Akinfenwa, who retired from the professional game at the end of the 2021/2022 season at the age of forty, is considered one of football's more colourful characters; a figure who made his name playing professionally for clubs such as Swansea City, AFC Wimbledon, and most recently before calling time on his time on this pitch, Wycombe Wanderers. He started his professional career in Lithuania but became a recognisable figure to many football fans for his gigantic physique more suited to boxing than football as well as his infectious sense of humour that saw him become a much-loved personality on and off the field of play. The third ghostwritten autobiography is that of former Premier League winger Jermaine Pennant, who played for Arsenal, Leeds United, Birmingham City and started the 2007 Champions League final for Liverpool. Lastly, I will discuss the ghostwritten life of Brixton-born Leroy Rosenior

who began his career as a teenager at Fulham in the early 1980s before going on to play for Queens Park Rangers, West Ham and Bristol City and then embarking on a career in coaching, management and football punditry. He is the former vice president of Show Racism the Red Card and in January 2019 received an MBE for his services to tackling discrimination in sport.

I will read how the areas of upbringing, education, relationships, racism and selfhood are represented across these four popular ghostwritten works and make comparisons thematically but also in terms of their modes of address, linguistic choices and levels of descriptive detail. I will discuss how these works, and the genre of ghostwritten football autobiographies in general, contribute to homogenising, negative portrayals of Black British masculinity. Returning to James Baldwin's definition of lovelessness towards the Black man as an 'overlooking, denying, evading his complexity' (Baldwin 1955: 11), I shall discuss the limitations of this formulaic genre and its role in perpetuating negative narratives and stereotypical images of Black British masculinity.

The role of the ghostwriter and the interests of the wider publishing industry in sustaining, rather than challenging, stories popular with its mainstream white readership has already been addressed in the introduction. However, the differing nature of the collaboration and the professional backgrounds of the ghostwriters in question is a relevant area of enquiry here. The ghostwritten autobiography of Leroy Rosenior *"It's Only Banter"* states on its cover page that is written 'with' Leo Moynihan, a prominent sports writer who had previously collaborated with former Scottish international, Gordon Strachan in 2004, and former England captain David Beckham in 2012.[8] In the acknowledgements page of *"It's Only Banter"* which prefaces the book, Rosenoir writes: 'I really wanted somebody to get this story over sympathetically and without bitterness' (Rosenior 2017: 9). Rosenior's plea here seems to suggest a genuine concern that the articulation of his life journey had the potential to be subject of the usual mistreatment on the part of the ghostwriter or that his experience of racism would become a story of anger or cynicism, as if it is the footballer and not the racism that is at fault.

[8] His most recent publication is the ghostwritten autobiography of former England international and Manchester United treble winner, Andrew Cole, entitled *Fast Forward*, which was released in 2019.

The autobiography of Jermaine Pennant's *Mental*, released in 2018, is ghostwritten by John Cross, the Chief Football Writer at *The Daily Mirror*. According to the jacket note, Cross 'has covered Jermaine Pennant's career since the early days,' suggesting that he has professional knowledge and insight into his subject and is therefore in a more advantageous position of offering the reader a more nuanced portrayal of Pennant's life. However, in spite of this claim for prolonged interest, even a suggested intimacy, there are no actual acknowledgements in *Mental*. This exclusion of any personal note seems to suggest that the publication of the book, and the relationship between the ghostwriter and the central subject, was a far more transactional process and a purely professional undertaking devoid of a more amiable bond that would warrant an overt nod to their personal relationship through a clear acknowledgement section, as seen in the majority of other ghostwritten football autobiographies.

In the acknowledgments of *The Beast*, Akinfenwa opens with 'I want to thank Damien McSorley for all his hard work and patience in collaborating with me to produce my story. Together we put in the long hours and forged a very close friendship. Thanks for all your help, bro.' This statement of gratitude for the labour involved and the friendship that evolved, alongside the emphasis on collaboration, clearly indicates that Akinfenwa regards this work as an act of co-creation. Yet while Akinfenwa, addresses McSorely as 'bro', a colloquial term indicating his sense of kinship, it remains relevant that before ghostwriting this book, McSorely worked at the now defunct 'lads mag' *Zoo*, having made the move from his role as acting editor at the also defunct *Nuts*. This career path indicates that McSorely has traded in and sought to normalise the problematic notions of masculinity and sexist beliefs associated with these now defunct publications.

Clyde Best's *The Acid Test*, is ghostwritten by Andrew Warshaw who, according to the hardback book jacket, 'collaborated with Clyde Best on this book' and 'is a 'veteran football journalist' who 'has written for numerous publications' including former Southampton and Wolves manager, Dave Jones, 'on his acclaimed autobiography, *No Smoke Without Fire*.' Here the professional credentials of the footballing ghostwriter lead in characterising the relationship. The experience of reporting on Black lives using the autobiographical form is sparse between these four ghostwriters, with the publications analysed within this chapter representing each of the ghostwriters' first venture into centrally chronicling Black life

stories using the ghostwritten autobiographical form, which is perhaps an indicator of some of the limitations that surface in the close reading of these works. Although I could not find any further evidence relating to their research methods, it seems unlikely that these ghostwriters have studied the lives of Black British sporting figures more widely or sought to gather information and to listen to voices that would sufficiently equip them with the tools needed to undertake the important challenge of rendering these footballing lives with sensitivity and attention to their heterogeneity.

A further noteworthy observation of the ghostwritten retellings of Black footballers' lives is how even the titles of the works foreground uncomfortably evocative, sometimes latently violent, connotations, especially when compared with those of their white counterparts. Several Black football autobiographies are provocatively named, including Paul Canonville's *Black and Blue* (2008), Adebayo Akinfenwa's *The Beast* (2017) and Jermaine Pennant's *Mental* (2018). These can be compared to recent publications of white footballers, such as Shay Given's *Any Given Sunday* (2017), Peter Crouch's *How to be a Footballer* (2018) or Jamie Redknapp's *My Family and the Making of a Footballer* (2020). From the outset, there is an uncomfortable and derogatory impression projected onto the Black footballer based solely on the chosen naming of the book, and, occasionally, the front cover image.

One of the shaping discourses around the presentation of the Black footballer that is often signalled by the front cover and echoed in the content, is the notion of the 'strong Black man'. The front cover of Akinfenwa's *The Beast,* for example, depicts a close-up image of his tight-vest-wearing, tattooed body, instantly provoking a potentially inflammatory first impression of a much-loved, and actually rather loveable, footballing figure. The image acts to embody the archetypal athletic, ruthless pose of a dominant sportsman suggestive of the 'strong Black man' narrative that feels troubling and archaic in the current climate and the conversations around toxic masculinity. Even though he is smiling, for anyone not familiar with Akinfenwa's charismatic persona, the image asserts an overt display of hardened masculinity that could easily be misconstrued. This visual code has a risk, which anthropologist Stanley Thangaraj (2017a) observes:

> The very body that is the spectacle and site of hero worship for many, also becomes indistinguishable in the larger social realm of the "dangerous" black male. The

> athletic black body is not far removed, or not removed at all, from the mainstream, institutionalised stereotypes of the dangerous, criminal black body. (Thangaraj in Burdsey 2021: 92)

Owing to his charismatic personality off the field and the name he has made for himself on the pitch, Akinfenwa is undoubtedly a character deserving of an autobiography that sensitively celebrates his rise from humble beginnings and his struggles as a nomadic athlete, to making a success of himself within the lower leagues of the English game as a larger-than-life footballing figure. This initial act of framing of Blackness seems to fix a racialised preconception and feed the assumption that Black footballers' lives are marked by physicality rather than complex inner lives, an impression heightened by titles that suggest marginalisation and experiences of social hostility as a limiting shorthand for the fuller story of their professional sporting lives.

Beyond these problematic titles and their uncomfortably evocative accompanying images, there is often a loveless and uninspiring tone in the way the story of the central subject is articulated in these ghostwritten autobiographies of Black British footballers. Moreover, the limited quality of the writing itself often diminishes the capacity of these works to render the subjectivity of these players or their experience living as Black British subjects in ways that the richer, more nuanced works by writers such as Phillips, Onuora and Bardowell have been able to achieve.

Upbringing

Given the importance of the contextual backstory to these stories of footballing success, it seems sensible to start with the presentation of the footballers' upbringing within the respective works. As you might expect, many football autobiographies, irrespective of the subject's ancestry and ethnicity, choose to start at the beginning; the part of the story that presents the footballer's early life before becoming a professional player that may begin to offer the reader insights into the nature and stakes of their journey. Such a beginning would likely include illuminating information about their parents - or carers, and perhaps anecdotal references to the first time they remember watching or playing football. The beginning of a ghostwritten autobiography therefore carries the responsibility of presenting this all-important formative period in such a way as to show how it shaped the person and footballer

they became in the future. This is often information to which the reader may not already be privy and key to understanding some of the wider context of their environment growing up. Starting at the very beginning, as the ghostwritten autobiographies under consideration here do, is important to the story arc but this decision also brings a responsibility to think about personal beginnings and questions of ancestry too. For Black British subjects there is a lot to consider in this regard. As Aniefiok 'Neek' Ekpoudom writes in his essay 'South London Soil' in the book *A New Formation: How Black Footballers Shaped the Modern Game*, 'our upbringings were British. Our families come from countries far from here. We carry their stories in our surnames. The matter of nationality is a complex one' (Ekpoudom in Jacobs 2022: 218). Yet the football autobiographies under critical scrutiny here do not seem to recognise that it is important to do justice to the complex ways in which ancestry and nationality inform each other for Black British subjects and how these also connect to racialised and class identities. As Campbell reaffirms 'the majority of soccer's playing workforce in England has historically consisted of men drawn from what we might describe as working-class families from socially and economically challenged locales' (Campbell 2020: 19). Rendering a young life under pressure both culturally and financially is significant as this is bound to shape the adult to come and how they view the world, yet these issues informing the upbringing of players demand sensitive and informed treatment to avoid stereotyping.

In *The Beast*, Akinfenwa's autobiography, it is his childhood in Hackney, East London, growing up in an urban estate in 1980s and 1990s, that offers a beginning. The autobiography opens with:

> I was born on 10 May 1982, and spent my early years on Mayville council estate in Islington, north London. We lived on the top floor of a block. My dad was Muslim and my mum was Christian. They were very strict. (Akinfenwa 2017: 2)

This succession of terse simple sentences is a marker of the plodding narrative style adopted in the rest of the book and results in a staccato formality that seems at odds with the warmth that the central subject is celebrated for during his playing career. With its hard cold facts, as demonstrated with the inclusion of proper nouns and numerical dates, the story presents a loveless and sterile start that fails to convincingly ventriloquise anything meaningful about

the footballer's family context and developing identity. Additionally, the reference to his parents being 'very strict' reasserts a hackneyed generalisation of immigrant parental sternness, an inclusion that might have been better told later on in the publication and with greater detail. A more effective beginning would linguistically harness a greater sense of rhythm and offer a more palpable sense of Akinfenwa's formative years that is not dulled by routine and convention, drawing out elements of his story from a new perspective in order to deepen the reader's understanding of the Black British experience.

The rather sparse use of richer language in the opening pages, gives the initial impression that Akinfenwa does not possess the eloquence needed to articulate his own life story in a full and fluent fashion which is at odds with what fans regularly see of him on programmes such as Sky Sports' *Soccer AM* and *Soccer Saturday*. The inclusion of the noun 'block' to describe his home, seems to point the reader to an idea of Akinfenwa's experience growing up in an impoverished council estate, casting him, before the reader has even delved deeper into his later life, as a by-product of inner-city social housing with suggestions of criminality and gangster culture already embedded within wider cultural narratives of Black British urban youth. This is compounded by further clichéd, underdeveloped imagery that pigeonholes Akinfenwa as the archetypal troubled, or troublemaking, Black boy. At one point Akinfenwa has to justify his perfectly innocent behaviour to the reader by explaining 'back in the day, everyone used to hang out at the bottom of the stairs in my block […] any outsider who met us probably thought we were some kind of crew or gang' (Akinfenwa 2017: 19). Akinfenwa confidently describes his environment and how his 'upbringing was a long way from lavish […] we didn't have the flash Nike trainers and stuff but […] if there was something we wanted, we'd have to tell our parents in January and then we'd have it for Christmas after they'd saved for it the rest of the year' (Akinfenwa 2017: 15). It is evidently clear with this last remark that Akinfenwa had a modest upbringing but also one full of love and surrounded by a large group of friends and family, although that sense of a tight-knit affection is lost within these lines which reads rather bluntly and lacking the sense of warmth deserving of this honest offering. The sparse style means that the reader is forced to fill in the gaps of Akinfenwa's story, adding to the likelihood that they - depending on their background and preconceptions - will bring to this individual story unhelpful assumptions of what it means to be a Black man growing up and living in a Hackney estate.

The Beast fails to do more than offer a basic summary of Akinfenwa's early years playing football and he informs us that 'the competition was intense! There was just a constant progression of wanting to play. Otherwise, we play "sixty seconds". If you don't know what that is, you're missing out!' (Akinfenwa 2017: 20). The repetitive inclusion of the exclamatory as a rhetorical device is unhelpfully provocative here, and generally an inadequate replacement for emotional exploration. It makes the narrative feel hyperbolic and melodramatic. As is too often seen in the literary depictions of Black footballers within their autobiographies, here the reader is presented with a romantic recasting of Akinfenwa seemingly being plucked out of obscurity and deprivation to become a superstar with football as the great conduit to his guaranteed success. Observing this opening within the more general context of this genre, the reader is not allowed the luxury of a personalised introduction that deviates from the archetypal construction of a footballer's ghostwritten autobiography.

The stylistic, linguistic and structural decisions that shape the presentation of Akinfenwa's upbringing in *The Beast* are similarly prominent in the autobiography of retired mixed-heritage footballer Jermaine Pennant in *Mental: Bad Behaviour, Ugly Truths and the Beautiful Game*. Immediately the provocative title of this work suggests an unsympathetic view of Pennant's apparent struggles with his mental health[9] and depicts him as some sort of 'wild-child', despite a largely impressive professional career that spanned nearly two decades, making over 350 appearances for Premier League clubs including Arsenal, Birmingham City, Liverpool and Stoke City.

Mental, is made up of various, rather basic, rhetorical features of tabloid journalism, interwoven with clumsy and clichéd attempts to shock the reader that confirm rather than complicate the popular idea of Pennant. These gestures start almost immediately with the description of Pennant's severely disrupted childhood. The narrative opens with Pennant stating: 'I grew up on a tough estate in Nottingham, the Meadows' (Pennant 2018: 1). From here onwards, the ghostwriter resorts to clickbait sensationalism and, similarly to how

[9] According to *The Irish Sun* 'brave Jermaine has opened up about his mental health and revealed he was diagnosed last year with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and PTSD linked to childhood trauma'.

Akinfenwa is immediately presented in the opening page of *The Beast,* this work contours the opening sentence with emotive lexis like 'tough estate' to unhelpfully characterise Pennant through a troubled upbringing from the outset. Suggestive language such as this, with its evident semantic links to criminality, is insensitively included from the very beginning to seemingly reaffirm the reader's existing expectations of the central subject and his fractured past.

As the ghostwriter, Cross swiftly plays up to pre-existing expectations of what readers and fans might expect of Pennant, who developed a 'bad boy' reputation in the eyes of some football fans and overlays this on the scene of his childhood home, dramatically if tersely narrated as Pennant testifies: 'I watched my dad selling drugs, turning our house into a drugs den, becoming a heroin addict, leaving shotgun cartridges around the place, having the front door kicked in by police and ending up in prison' (Pennant 2018: 2). There is an unequivocally loveless tone to the writing here and the ghostwriter moves through the events too promptly to garner any real sense of the emotive trauma inflicted upon a young Pennant growing up in an evidently dysfunctional childhood home. Instead of sympathising or setting up a scene to consider the likely impact of the subject's turbulent upbringing as a member of society's underclass, or even describing the complicated emotional dynamics of Pennant's childhood to enthrall the reader more fully, the ghostwriter seemingly shorthands a gangster lifestyle depicted in an unenlightening and uncaring fashion.

The conflated narrative of Black British lives with criminality and drugs is a long-standing one and indicative of the wider racialised framework that this autobiography sits within. Stuart Hall's findings within the co-authored book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State, and Law and Order*, first published in 1978, examines the relationship between perceptions of Black men, the act of committing crime, and specifically the irrational 'moral panic' that follows. Hall ultimately determines that it is economic factors that are the root cause in such instances and points to 'a critical intersection between black crime, black labour and the deteriorating situation in the black areas. Even these must be contextualised, by setting them in their proper framework: the economic, social and political crisis into which the society is receding' (Hall 1978: 338). Pennant's father's story in *Mental* is compounded by numerous stories of his unscrupulousness, and there is no genuine interest in exploring Pennant's feelings regarding his father's descent into addiction and criminal behaviour in a way that

might present their relationship in a more sympathetic and searching fashion as a shaping force within his life as a whole.

As Pennant's autobiography progresses, this notably scant sensationalistic style is further employed. At one point Pennant divulges what he witnessed within the Three Bridges pub 'which was a stone's throw from the house' (Pennant 2018: 10). He reports seeing people, his dad included, 'selling drugs there, seeing drugs there, was completely normal. And I reckon that if it hadn't been for football and my good friends looking out for me, I would have ended up doing the same' (Pennant 2018: 10). Although the use of the repetition of 'selling' appears to offer these words a more rhythmical and novelistic depth that is often helpful to evoke an emotional response from the reader, this admission, much like the rest of the publication, takes an incident that should be shocking and simply recounts it without any sense of its personal impact. There is also an artificiality to the way that the references to 'drugs' are so liberally uttered, feeding into a simplistic narrative of wrongdoing and criminality that is more likely to compound this idea of Pennant being a menace or mischief-maker instead of focusing on the fact that he was still just a child. Later Pennant admits to the risks for him in this environment: 'it was a tough upbringing. I saw so many things that you sometimes forget one incident to the next. But I witnessed a murder, even got questioned in connection with the murder – and that's something you never forget' (Pennant 2018: 11). Given that Pennant declares how memorable and significant such an incident was to him, the fact that the nuanced details are skirted over shows a frustrating reluctance to explore the more complicated texture of his childhood and the memories carried into adult life.

Mental's sensationalistic delivery is not purely isolated to stories about Pennant's father but informs the bulk of the narrative relating to Pennant himself with an over-performative underpinning tone that positions Pennant squarely within the harshly sketched domain of Black British criminality. This is best exemplified during a dramatic retelling of a violent incident that occurred when Pennant was a teenager:

> All of a sudden, they must have charged at us. They stabbed one of our friends in the shoulder, even though he didn't even realise he'd been stabbed until all the fighting had all finished. They had knives, baseball bats and some guns. I don't honestly know if they were loaded with live ammunition or if they were firing blanks. But, as they

> run past, they stabbed one and hit another with a baseball bat, and a few shots went off. They all ran off. Our gang chased them. I didn't see it, but one of the St Ann's gang got caught, they turned on him and he later died in hospital. (Pennant 2018: 11)

This revelatory, undoubtedly dramatic episode is told in hyperbolic fashion, stripping the narrative of any elaborative or emotional detail that would enable the reader to understand the fear Pennant would have felt in that moment of being so perilously close to the prospect of death. The sentences are stitched together with vocabulary linked explicitly to juvenile acts of delinquent violent destructiveness, feeding into the problematic narrative that Black boys like Pennant are too easily tempted into a world of wrongdoing and then marked out as troublemakers. This mode of racialised life framing is characterised by journalist and writer Jesse Bernard in his essay in *Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space* where he calls out how 'being Black in Britain, with what they'd call behavioural issues, means that whether at five, fifteen or thirty years old, I'd experience the reality of being seen as aggressive and volatile' (Bernard in Owusu 2019: 73). This framing by others troublingly mirrors the autobiographical story presented under Pennant's name, beginning with the portrayal of Pennant's father that exacerbates the representation of Black lives persistently being embroiled in violence and criminality.

This reoccurring thread of living in a context of violence appears frequently in *Mental*: 'I was inside KFC, a rival gang came running past and they shot a few people inside…I had jumped over the counter and stayed hiding there! It was like a movie. I heard the shots and jumped for my life!' (Pennant 2018:13). However, in similar fashion to the previous episode, the dramatic retelling of a potentially life-endangering scenario is presented through a dispassionate listing of simple sentences and exclamations that make the story seem slapstick or like a badly-made Hollywood blockbuster: full of action, drama and violence but lacking the human detail that evokes compassion.

As seen in the descriptions of Adebayo Akinfenwa growing up in Hackney, Leroy Rosenior growing up in Brixton to follow, along with a wealth of other examples, the assertion of poverty and general dysfunction which is a major trope foregrounded by these stories of Black British footballers is again confirmed throughout Pennant's autobiography. The loveless manner in which these troubled childhoods are narrated adds to the risk that they will

simply reinforce negative ideas of Black masculinity and negate the idea of a complex emotional life for the footballing legend.

The presentation of Leroy Rosenior's formative years growing up in South London in *"It's Only Banter"* is on the whole a better example of how richer writing can harbour fruitful results, but it is still guilty of being insensitively formulaic on occasion in its presentation of yet another Black man growing up in an undesirable environment. Rosenior reports that 'Our street was at the back of Brixton Prison […] designed to frighten those who arrive at its gates but in many ways it was a reassuring presence in my young life. Acting like a garden fence, the prison was a natural boundary' (Rosenior 2017: 41). Further on in the book Rosenior reveals: 'Paul Gadd was my best mate from an early age […] Paul and I were inseparable. We had very different upbringings; his had obviously become very plush. (Rosenior 2017: 47). Although this work is a little sparse in hearing from Rosenior directly about his experience of growing up, as this is largely told through his father, Willie, the autobiography does make an effort to present Rosenior's journey to becoming a footballer.

Aside from *"It's Only Banter"* the presentation of these footballers' upbringing is often reduced to the diminishing idea that they are Black men who were so utterly fettered by their environment that football was their only escape. This repeated notion of Black men growing up in insalubrious environments who shunned education for football also appears in Clyde Best's *The Acid Test* as Best asserts that 'nothing came close to playing sport, which prepares you for life' (Best 2016: 5). This statement epitomises the portrayal of the tunnel-vision ambition of these players which blinds them to educational opportunities for their betterment.

On the whole however, and especially in terms of literary style employed to present Best's Bermudian upbringing, *The Acid Test* offers the reader a refreshing depth in its introduction of the central subject and the setting, in stark contrast to the autobiographies of Pennant and Akinfenwa. Best describes how:

> We have no rivers or mountains in Bermuda, no sources of fresh running water. The roofs of our houses are limewashed to collect rainwater, which is funnelled into a tank beneath our houses, then pumped back inside for showers and washing. Our houses are painted in different pastel colours of blue, pink and yellow. (Best 2016: 3)

There is a detail and a dynamism in this early depiction of Bermuda that exceeds the usual parameters of the genre. The inclusion of the verbs 'funnelled', 'pumped', 'running' and 'washing' in describing this rural and pastorally picturesque landscape make the writing far more compelling and memorable. These lexical choices evoke the vivid vibrancy of a lived and colourful setting that is also a place of belonging and an effective community. This descriptive portrayal of Bermuda corresponds with the ideal of setting as expressed by playwright and dramatist Elinor Fuchs, who insists that when setting a story, the writer 'listen[s] to its "music"' because 'every dramatic world will have, or suggest, characteristic sounds - of mourning, celebration, children's patter, incantation' (Fuchs 2004: 7). The extract from the opening of *The Acid Test* meets this quality of a sensory setting that seems almost alive, and thereby evokes a palpable sense of three-dimensionality and subsequently, credibility.

Education

As Paul Ian Campbell suggests in his short 2020 monograph *Education, Retirement and Career Transitions for 'Black' Ex-Professional Footballers: 'From being idolised to stacking shelves*', 'working-class men's negative experiences as schoolboys within compulsory education were also complicated by issues of race' (Campbell 2020: 25). The subjects of these autobiographies, from as early as their primary school education, are burdened by their skin colour in the eyes of society, including most debilitatingly, in the school environment which should be fostering a sense of self-belief and possibility within young boys instead of stripping them of their potential to engage with education as something that can be enjoyed. As Campbell continues, 'as black students, teachers and career advisers too enthusiastically directed them to sport and to careers which required vocational and not academic skills' (Campbell 2020: 25). While the later success of the footballers whose stories are published may eclipse the racism and the limitations placed on them by an education system that pushes vocations within the music industry and sport as part of its structural discrimination, this denial of an educational pathway is an important part of their life stories. Campbell's findings 'also highlighted how teachers' perceptions of black students seemed to be informed by wider stereotypes and associations of black youth as hostile and socially deviant [...] consequently, some of their teachers appeared to adopt especially hard-line and zero-tolerance strategies when managing and disciplining participants. (Campbell 2020: 26). From

too young an age, a Black boy navigating the British education system quickly become the subjects of 'tough love' because of the colour of their skin and has to endure tensions and mistreatment as a result of institutionalised racism, an experience that differs significantly compared the ameliorative experience of their white classmates.

This stereotyped rendition of Black masculinity within the unforgiving education setting is best epitomised in *The Beast,* when Akinfenwa talks about his ambition to become a footballer, 'I never had any aspirations of ever doing anything else, so I invested all my energy into it' (Akinfenwa 2017: 22). He continues: 'I didn't do very well in my GCSEs. When I took my results home and showed by parents, they weren't even surprised […] they knew I was into football' (Akinfenwa 2017: 55). Confessions like these seem to reinforce the strengthening impression that Akinfenwa, a teenager at this point, was a Black man who showed little interest in pursuing an educational route which would have, almost certainly, provided him with a more secure pathway to a potentially more stable long-term career. While the narrative presents football as the vocation here, there is also a strong sense that educational achievement was not expected of a young Black man, feeding into already pre-conceived notions of Black men and poor educational aspirations. The word 'invested' is also an interesting choice, thinking about the verb in relation to the semantics of money, and linked to class, which is uncomfortably positioned given the demographic of Akinfenwa's background and ultimately the lack of investment within the urban environment he grew up in.

The Acid Test is also guilty, on occasion, of being evasive and vague in its depiction of the central subject's educational endeavours, as evidenced when Best admits that 'my primary school years seemed to flash by' (Best 2015: 4) and 'I was quickly growing up' (Best 2016: 5). The early formative years that help the reader to understand the backstory shaping the central subject are, in essence, omitted here and replaced by sweeping statements that glide over Best's early years in Bermuda and are inadequate in illuminating the integral island backstory of this influential footballer. The implicit suggestion is of yet another Black man who shows little regard for gaining the relevant qualifications that would serve them well in the future if they failed to make the grade as a footballer. There is the assumption here that sport, and most applicably, football, takes precedent over studies and is seemingly more fruitful in garnering life skills, and wider career prospects, than pursuing academic

endeavours; Best admits, 'if I had a favourite subject it was probably geography or history, but nothing came close to playing sport' (Best 2016: 5). Best is resolute that football was his only pre-determined life path when there were options to pursue other paths: 'Going to an all-boys school, you had to pick a trade of some description, so I picked panel-beating. But in truth, it was always sport for me […] Thank goodness for football!' (Best 2016: 10).

In *Mental*, Pennant's father, Gary, is given regular opportunities to tell his side of the story and admits that when his son was 'fourteen. I took him out of school a year early because he had so much talent. He went into digs with Notts County so he could concentrate on his football full time' (Pennant 2018: 30). An admission that confirms Pennant's compulsory education was curtailed prematurely when undoubtedly continuing his education for the usual further two years, despite the discriminatory dynamics of the classroom, would have been beneficial in helping develop Pennant into a well-rounded individual which would have served him well during his professional football career too. Pennant himself reveals:

> I was never great at school. My punctuality was never perfect - and that's putting it mildly! When I was fourteen or fifteen, Notts County told the school they wanted to take me out for a whole year and the school thought it would be better for me. (Pennant 2018: 32)

Having not made it through secondary school or gained any qualifications, Pennant *had* to make football work, because failure to make it as a professional would have been detrimental to Pennant's life and career prospects, a risky strategy with a debatable outcome.

In *"It's Only Banter"*, Rosenior reveals passing his 11-plus and doing 'okay' in his O Levels but admits that he 'wouldn't say [he] was the best scholar in south London' (Rosenior 2017: 54). Compounding this self-deprecation is a snippet from Rosenior's mum, Gladys, who says:

> Leroy was always playing games, running, leaping. He'd leave early for school so he could play [football] before classes began and he'd play after school. I remember one teacher at his primary school taking me and Leroy's father to one side and saying, "I'm afraid we won't make much out of Leroy." (Rosenior 2017: 54)

This damning, and frankly dangerous, conclusion was bound to make Rosenior shun education and pursue sporting endeavours, even though later in life Rosenior admits that while studying for his A Levels 'university might have been the option' (Rosenior 2017: 55). Ultimately, as with the case of all of these Black men, football won, and a football autobiography celebrates this triumph. However, what is not included in this life story of a Black man who had the choice of university too is what might have pushed him away from higher education, alongside the draw to football, how 'negative experiences of school were deeply connected to their statuses and realities as young working-class and black boys within an education system, which often overtly and institutionally discriminated against black men' (Campbell 2020: 34).

Relationships

In terms of the presentation of the personal lives of Black footballers when not on the field of play, there is often a troubling presumption peddled by the wider media that Black footballers struggle to maintain healthy and stable relationships. This reporting is not only limited to romantic relationships but also applies to friends and family; very often, the lazy generalisation casts Black men as sexual deviants who are regularly embroiled in numerous, often high-profile, unhealthy - and potentially even abusive relationships - with multiple partners. And those who do commit to the sanctity of marriage, are guilty of committing adulterous acts that more often than not, end in a premature, often quite public and messy, divorce. It is not often enough that examples of successful relationships are celebrated within these works. Rather, as seen in Pennant's story, you are more likely to find statements which compound the notion of Black men being oversexualised and disloyal deviants:

> suddenly you want to go out every week, pulling different birds, doing God knows what until all hours of the morning. The more famous you become the worse it gets, and that's when all eyes are on you. Obviously, at first you just want to go out, have a few drinks, but the next thing you know you're in the papers for falling out of some nightclub. I was always more into women than booze. (Pennant 2018: 213)

There are moments in *Mental* where genuinely traumatic experiences with the opposite sex for Pennant are overlaid by this emphasis on his sexual desires and prowess with the result that significant ordeals are not given the attention they deserve and there is an avoidance of

the trauma that might have been caused. These include the description of the moment Pennant was released from prison in 2005: 'I couldn't wait to get out, have a McDonald's and get laid! I was desperate to nick a bird. It was a good feeling' (Pennant 2018: 106). Even within the pre-existing expectations of the genre and considering Pennant's reputation, this depiction is troubling. The humour here falls flat because of the uncomfortable racialisation that is implicit in this episode. The flippant use of the exclamatory, another reference to fast food, the awkwardly colloquial lexical choices of 'nick' and 'bird' sound trite and demeaning. This depiction of Pennant as a slightly chauvinistic Casanova suggests a reckless and troubled footballing personality and entirely fails to offer any nuanced sense of how Pennant might have felt in the moments after leaving prison as a prominent public-facing professional Premier League footballer with extensive media visibility. Moreover, the manner in which Pennant is depicted as desiring sex within seconds of his release seems to play to the archetypal racialised frames of hypersexuality that are placed on Black men more generally. As Burdsey writes, 'these frames are characterised by long-established themes of racialised objectification, sexualisation and dehumanisation' (Burdsey 2021: 39), and project attributes which intrusively go beyond the footballer's footballing ability. 'Some racial frames have nothing to do with football or the ability to play it whatsoever. Black men's supposedly large penises continue to fascinate many white football fans […] a big penis is framed almost universally in popular culture as a positive masculine attribute' (Burdsey 2021: 40). This is best epitomised when Pennant details how he goes about picking up women when he suggests that:

> What they [women] don't yet know is that you are literally going to take them home or to a hotel, have sex, do all sorts, and probably won't speak to them again. We don't care, and the reality is that we just want a shag. We used to call it Monopoly […] if she was fit and famous then she's high property, worth a lot, possibly Bond Street or Mayfair. Then there was a girl a lot of the lads had been with and she would be Old Kent Road. You get the gist. (Pennant 2018: 214)

There is almost no effort to present any of Pennant's relationships with various partners in a healthier light and, as the narrative confirms its negative version of masculinity Pennant even offers the reader advice: 'I had one piece of advice for a young player, it would be: stay away from women!' (Pennant 2018: 212).

For the most part, the manner in which Pennant's story is constructed throughout *Mental* does not offer an embodied sense of experience, insight and reflexivity deserving of a figure who overcame significant disadvantage and adversity to become a largely lauded Premier League footballer. Apart from the over-sensationalised anecdotes involving his intermittently present father and close shaves in chicken shops, there is little coverage of Pennant's development as a person away from the football field and a weak sense of him as a complex human figure. The manner in which the autobiography is structured does not seamlessly explore Pennant's life story in the manner deserving of a figure who, despite several setbacks on and off the football field, went on to play for some of the best football teams in the country (and abroad), and to achieve a multitude of accolades. Rather, the narrative is punctuated with regular interjections from apparently influential figures throughout Pennant's life and football career, including his agent, Sky Andrews, his friend and fellow footballer, Jon Fortune, and his father, Gary. The structure of the autobiography therefore situates the central subject adrift, implying but never exploring the incessant pressures that come with trying to make it as a professional footballer. In some senses this structure might provide a valuable insight into the making of a footballing career but within *Mental* it reads as somewhat disjointed and clumsily cobbled-together. We so often think of footballers as natural-born talents but very often there is a great deal of scaffolding and support that enables their careers and arguably shapes the footballing subject. In the case of Pennant, it could be argued that John Cross' decision to intersperse Pennant's 'own' story with regular interventions by figures from his life enables not only his own bad decisions to be voiced, but also the way in which he is impacted by the advice and actions of those around him from a young age. This is epitomised when his father, Gary Pennant, says 'He [Jermaine] was about thirteen when I first started having my real drug problems' (Pennant 2018: 8). Yet what remains problematic about this work is the way it depicts Pennant's difficult family relationships and involvement with gangs as a reality simply to be observed rather than to be felt.

As level-headed and rational as Rosenior comes across for the most part of his autobiography, even he cannot escape the lazy depiction of going through a frenzied womanising stage. After the failure of his marriage, Rosenior admits:

> I took very nicely to life as a bachelor…I was in my element […] you go out, be seen and queues part, drinks are bought, girls flirt and guys swoon. I embraced that stardom. Why shouldn't I? […] Many a night I would get in there, letting down my hair, no longer hindered by the thought of training, my weight, or indeed a failing marriage. I had plenty of girlfriends. (Rosenior 2017: 169)

However positive the portrayal of Rosenior in parts within *"It's Only Banter"*, it is presented almost as fact that Black footballers of a certain generation fail to respond to fame, popularity and attention from the opposite sex in a manner that depicts all involved in a better light.

There is a bit more warmth and substance in the story of Clyde Best, a depiction that seems more fulfilling, even wholesome in some of its descriptions, and exhibits actual examples of genuine love. One example is when Best describes arriving in England and looking for somewhere to stay:

> When I knocked at the door of 23 Ronald Avenue, a certain Mrs Jessie Charles, mother of John and Clive, gave me a quizzical look and wondered who the heck this stranger was, knocking at her door out of the blue. She could have slammed it straight in my face […] When I explained the situation, however, she immediately took me in. It was an extraordinary act of generosity. I literally had no idea where else I would have stayed that night. I didn't know the area at all and it was getting dark. Conversely, she didn't know me from Adam yet welcomed me with open arms. I'm indebted to that family for so much - as I will mention time and time again. They played a key role in my upbringing […] She was like a second mum to me. (Best 2016: 31)

This rendering of an emotional life is further evidenced when he talks about his relationship with his wife:

> I had run up an astronomical phone bill to Bermuda every week calling Alfreida, my girlfriend back home, and we decided there was no point being separated any longer. I wouldn't say it had been love at first sight between us, but suffice to say I could see

> the attraction at an early age […] I'd had a lot of female friends but no girlfriend as such. (Best 2016: 108)

Regrettably, instances of such attention to the emotional lives and relationships of these footballers are few and far between within the cross-section of examined autobiographies.

Racism

It is an almost impossible task to articulate the life and career of a Black footballer without also talking about the chronic presence of racism and the many ways in which a Black footballer, throughout the decades, has had to navigate perpetual, multi-angled abuse simply because of the colour of their skin. The impact of racist abuse can certainly have life-changing and career-altering consequences as Emy Onuora reports 'we will never know how many footballers were lost to the game in the days before the authorities moved to impose sanctions for racist behaviour in the game, when issues of racism were scrutinised in far less detail than they are today' (Onuora 2015: 171).

Leroy Rosenior's autobiography is a far from spectacular in its portrayal given the potential to flesh out the individual details of particular incidents (of racism or otherwise) and thereby to distance itself from the one-dimensionality often seen in such works. In common with the works aforementioned, Rosenior's story, similar to the presentation of Pennant's *Mental,* is sometimes intrusively interspersed with short passages from other subjects, including old school friends like Martin Loveday, former teammates including Tony Gale and Tony Finnegan, the journalist Oliver Holt, and his son, Liam Rosenior, among others. However, instead of corroborating the overarching narrative of Rosenior's career, as seemingly intended, these interjections ultimately hinder the continuous reading experience, impacting the fluency and cohesion of the story of his life and career. Almost as a result of this structure, incidents of racism and its impact on Rosenior are only tentatively explored in *"It's Only Banter"* despite the titular allusion. It is seemingly a subject matter that Rosenior does not want to dwell on and owing to the autobiography's structure of a first-person narrative interspersed with a number of passages and mini-interviews with other notable figures, the reader has to work harder to decipher which testimony of a particular incident to believe and how to judge the extent of the racism suffered.

Tony Gale, one of the figures to feature and a teammate of Rosenior's at Fulham and later at West Ham United, is described by Rosenior as 'the life and soul of the dressing room' (Rosenior 2017: 60). In a passage where Gale talks about the joviality of the dressing room, he says that Rosenior 'took the banter well' (Rosenior 2017: 61), which includes no doubt jokes directed at Rosenior (and Paul Parker) about being Black men. Although presumably well-meaning, statements like these, especially from Gale's privileged position of being a white man in this homogeneous hyper-masculine space, suggest that the issue of racial discrimination was probably not taken as seriously as it should have been at the time and was dismissed as nothing more than 'banter'. This nonchalance around racism is echoed in a passage included a little earlier in the book from Rosenior's schoolboy friend Martin Loveday who, referring to the racial tensions that existed in South London at the time, recalls that 'race didn't seem to be an issue. I'm white so maybe I would say that' (Rosenior 2017: 53). This utterance seems at odds to the wider feeling of discontent felt by many residents of colour in the local area, as epitomised by the infamous Brixton riots of 1981, which occurred 'just a mile' from Rosenior's home. The riots which are thought to have begun following an incident of police brutality on Railton Road, 'have been called uprisings […] and were fought by young black people in response to years of systemic persecution and prejudice' (Olusoga 2016: 517). Although the historical record provides accounts of racially motivated hostility in the area he grew up, Rosenior, according to his ghostwriter's version at least, was 'too cocooned […] to know about the hardships of the young black men and women living just around the corner from me' (Rosenior 2017: 53).

Yet while the predominant tactic of this book seems to be to play down the realities and harm of racist attitudes and abuse, there are fleeting moments of recognition. Later in the book as Rosenior and his assistant Paul Mortimer return to England via Paris following a short, and unsuccessful stint coaching the Sierra Leonean national team, the narrative describes how: 'Two dishevelled, tired-looking black guys with African stamps all over their passports drew suspicious and curious responses from officious custom officers […] And that's when we heard it. *Thwack!* The sound of a blue medical glove being put on and that's when I snapped' (Rosenior 2017: 220). This extract epitomises the book's patchy, unsettled and inconsistent style. The description of how the two men would have been perceived, with its use of compound adjective 'tired-looking' and the implied exhaustion of being a Black man in white bureaucratic spaces like airport customs, is vivid, astute and well put-together. But next to it,

the italicised onomatopoeia of '*Thwack!*' seems ill-fitting, unfunny and unnecessary and ultimately takes away the gravity of an ordeal of being the subject of abhorrent racist abuse within a very public arena.

From this account, it seems that a Black footballer must essentially ignore, and even tolerate, racial abuse for the greater good and must do so without having a chip on their shoulder. Rosenior writes that 'the key was not to let these people, be they in the crowd or on the pitch, get under my skin' (Rosenior 2017: 81). The image of 'skin' is particularly pertinent here as it brings to the fore the futility of the reason behind the abuse (because he is a Black man with darker skin than some others on the football field) and in a sensory fashion, captures the racial animosity Rosenior experienced while playing. The idea that by putting up with abuse, Black footballers act as the figureheads for future generations is heroic but ineffective and yet it forms a significant thread within these publications. Recalling another incident of racial abuse experienced while playing away at Elland Road, the home of Leeds United, in 1984, Rosenior continues:

> Paul [Parker] and I were greeted with 5,000 or more Leeds fans with their right hands, erect to the sky, shouting "Seig Heil" […] we are all individuals and we had to deal with the racism that came our way regularly in our own different ways. Paul Parker and I were shaken by what happened at Leeds, but it wasn't spoken about in the dressing room. (Rosenior 2017: 87)

It is an indictment of the sad state of affairs for Black footballers at the time that there was an official silence around their abuse. As this anecdote brings to light, players like Rosenior and Paul Parker had to 'deal' with horrific abuse because they did not have the opportunity to unburden themselves by talking about it or the support to challenge it and speak out.

The racism Rosenior incessantly suffered during his playing career is largely overlooked in this version of his story, to such an uneasy extent that at times it creates ambiguity about just how bad the racism was, despite the well-established fact that the behavior from a large number of fans in the terraces in the mid-1980s was at its worst. For instance, after being racially abused on his debut for Queens Park Rangers at Loftus Road in 1984, including being called a 'black c.u.n.t', Rosenior admits that he 'was used to the language' (Rosenior

2016: 101), even though the abuse from that particular spectator on the night was so vitriolic that his 'mum, dad, and sisters never came to watch [him] play again' (Rosenior 2016: 102). The disparaging comments directed at Rosenior in this instance, and referenced throughout the book, are simply not explored in any depth and so there is little insight into how what Rosenior endured on a weekly basis shaped him as Black man and the subsequent impact on his relationship with support network of close friends and family.

The way in which racism calls into play an unhelpful hyper-masculinity is foregrounded in *The Beast* as Akinfenwa describes his reaction to being subjected to racial abuse from his teammate while playing in Lithuania:

> I was there one time when a player on my own team had a go. It was an away game, so there were a couple of thousand people watching. He wanted me to pass to him, but there was no way I could so I kept the ball, and I heard him say, "Negro". I went up to him and got in his face in the middle of the match. I didn't give a fuck' (Akinfenwa 2017: 81)

In this example, it seems that racism is being deflected by hypermasculinity, a defensive mechanism to cope with, and ultimately deflect, the abuse of being called something abhorrent by someone who should be an ally. Although Akinfenwa's actions were perfectly understandable given the level of provocation, I question the manner in which the anecdote is articulated, especially the euphemistic way the cause of the altercation is described as Akinfenwa's teammate who 'had a go'. This terse depiction of the fractious exchange doesn't allow us to vividly experience the tension and trauma of the racial abuse suffered beyond any superficial level, or to consider the possible psychological impact of this abuse that was aimed at him from a teammate who is meant to support (and protect) him on the football field, on Akinfenwa's mental health and on his ability to trust his teammates in the future. Instead, here and throughout, there is an over-reliance on a more generalised retelling of his response, that is over almost immediately and resorts to familiar tropes of using his strength and stature to throw his weight around. This is further exemplified in the retelling of another dispute between Akinfenwa and one of his own teammates, Leon Knight, on the team bus while playing for Swansea City: 'I couldn't hold myself back any more, so I lunged for him […] If I'd managed to get hold of him, I swear I would have popped his head like a pimple'

(Akinfenwa 2017: 119). The seemingly faux-aggressive tone here coupled with the rather absurd simile only acts to reinforce the uncomfortable notion that Akinfenwa appears to be a footballer unable to control his emotions without a more nuanced and empathetic depiction of his relationships with his fellow teammates or his good-humoured character when not being racially abused that aligns more closely to the much-enamoured character known within the wider footballing circles.

Clyde Best arrived from Bermuda to England in August 1968 at the age of seventeen and made his debut for West Ham United in a 1-1 home draw against Arsenal a year later. He was not the first Black football player to play for West Ham in the modern era,[10] but 'he was the highest profile one […] at a time when racism in English football was at its worst' (Hern, Gleave 2020: 212). Throughout his spell at West Ham United, he was regularly the subject of racial abuse from the terraces, predominately while playing away, but soon become a fan-favourite at Upton Park when playing in front of the home fans. As Harry Redknapp acknowledges in the foreword of *The Acid Test,* 'you'd have to put [Clyde] right at the top in terms of breaking down racial barriers' (Best 2016: ix). Yet, as Best admits in the prologue of *The Acid Test*, racism within the footballing sphere was ever-present during his stint on the pitch: 'throughout my career, the spectre of racism was never far away, but I had to try and be bigger than the bigots' (Best 2016: xiv). The alliterative play on words within the phrase 'bigger than the bigots' is particularly pertinent as a sentiment that embodies the overarching tone of this book, one of stoic resilience and defiance against a backdrop of incessant racial abuse. As Best affirms, 'most English clubs back then were naive and scared to give black players a chance' (Best 2016: 93).

Specific anecdotes are given from Best's time playing for West Ham United in the 1960s and 1970s that directly reference the treatment he received as one of the first noteworthy post-war Black footballers to play in the top division.

> I had been getting some racist stick from a section of the crowd but I was determined it was not going to upset me […] I kept going. Peter Scott came roaring in on me from the right-back position but he was too late. David Lawson, the Everton goalie, came

[10] John William Charles, the first recognised Black footballer to play for West Ham United, made his first team debut against Blackburn Rovers in May 1963 aged eighteen.

> running out, trying to narrow the angle, but he was too late as well. I pulled the trigger and watched the net bulge. GOAL! I had scored the winner against one of England's top teams in Bobby Moore's anniversary game. What a feeling. Suddenly the racist chanting stopped and I could hear some of the Everton fans applauding me'. (Best 2016: 103)

This is a rather rudimentary retelling of a big moment for Best. There is an unsatisfying vagueness in this extract, epitomised by the euphemistic phrase 'racist stick' when perhaps a more detailed descriptive offering might have provided a clearer, more sensory image of what happened and helped convey the extent to which the racism from the stands may or may not have impacted his performance, giving readers, both black and white, a fuller picture of the abuse that Best faced. The simple sentence 'GOAL!', with the capitalisation and exclamation mark, feels juvenile and incongruous, especially in the context of the ongoing racist abuse in the terraces, and appears more akin to a children's comic book rendition. The overarching message of the retelling within this extract is somewhat troubling too, suggesting that to defeat racism all a Black footballer has to do is be consistently good at football and score goals. This is a sentiment and a strategy that Best explicitly reasserts, saying 'as I've said a million times, the best way to silence those kind of chants was to ram it down their throats by sticking the ball in the net' (Best 2016: 104). A notion, that once articulated on the page, feels too short-sighted in the complex process to fully eradicate the problem of institutionalised racism in the sport for good, and raises concerns around the treatment Black players might receive if they do not play well on occasions, or do not score as many goals as Best did in his career. Despite his ground-breaking achievements on this field, and the seemingly glib idea of how to deal with abuse, Best does admit that not enough progress has been made to rid the game of racial abuse: 'let's face it, in 2016 people were still talking about racism in the same way as when I played. These things should be long sorted now' (Best 2016: 73).

Best is also aware of the wider problems of racialisation as he reports that 'it wasn't just footballers who had to put up with the abuse. Black hospital nurses, black teachers, black shopkeepers. You name it, all of us had to deal with it' (Best 2016: xv). These comments acknowledge the wider struggle Black people faced living in Britain around the period Best

was playing football, providing a context for Best's experience on the pitch which was punctuated by regular abuse from fans. As pointed out in *Football's Black Pioneers*:

> Clyde makes the point that it wasn't just footballers who experienced racism in England but other black people, too. The only difference was that they [footballers] were in the public eye and the abuse was witnessed by tens of thousands, often with millions watching on TV' (Hern, Gleave 2020: 212).

It is clear that Best was still very much an anomaly in the footballing arena around this time and that 'football [in the 1960s], however, was still very much a white man's sport' (Best 2016: 71) because 'in those days, as a black player, no matter where you went you would be in for a hard time' (Best 2016: 103).

The Acid Test demonstrates a great deal of potential in attempting to articulate the life story of a Black British-based footballer in a nuanced and authentic manner but with missed opportunities to hone in on the privileged perspective of one of the first noteworthy Black men to play in the upper echelons of the English game at a time when racism was rife. Through Warshaw, Best sometimes provides more fleshed out context around the experience of being a Black footballer in Britain at a time of wider unrest, adding sufficient texture to the writing to furnish the narrative with the details likely to evoke a more profound emotional response. At other times, however, the writing limps along without providing the desired arc of anticipation and energy to captivate the reader fully or finding a voice that is more representative of the life of this Bermudian-born player who, through horrific levels of abuse from the terraces and pockets of wider society, carried on scoring goals for fun. While linguistically there is much to appreciate about the writing of this life story in places, especially in the intermediary chapters of the book, the emphasis on personal success feels like an evasion of wider issues and clearly excelling at scoring is not a viable strategy against continuing racist abuse.

Selfhood

Given the apparent ease with which a ghostwriter can sometimes quite unfairly depict the life story of a Black footballer, both by tarnishing their narrative with unhelpful prejudices and by not giving certain themes like racism the weight they deserve in the manner most fitting, it

seems like a useful process to look for moments within these works when the central subject attempts to reflect on who they are and how they are seen. Several examples of the footballer beginning to examine their own life, privilege and positionality on and off the football field, and articulating 'in their own words' how they feel about themselves in a candid and illuminating fashion are notable. From as early as page two of *The Beast*, Akinfenwa asserts: 'Do I think I'm a rebel? To an extent, yes I do. I never set out to be, but that's how I turned out. I'm late all the time, I never pay club fines, and I pretty much do my own thing' (Akinfenwa 2017: 2). The interrogative opening, 'Do I think I'm a rebel?' almost seems to be a question that stands separate from the life Akinfenwa wants to describe and possibly indicates his awareness of being interpellated into socially dominant negative versions of the Black man. The tone of the response is an archetypally self-justifying one and risks reasserting an uncomfortable notion of the Black man's resistance to authority, especially relating to an apparent recklessness with money and an inability to be punctual. Although there is a relaxed register employed in the writing, the connotation of the noun 'rebel' is jarringly quasi-military and incongruous at the very start of the publication. More strikingly, the qualities to which Akinfenwa confesses do not correspond with the actions or identity of a 'rebel' but rather those of a figure who displays behaviour that is just a little blasé in nature. Essentially, by including such rhetorical devices as the interrogative around a stereotype, McSorley triggers Akinfenwa to respond within an already distorted and constricted framework. Akinfenwa's life story is already being shaped into a stereotypical romanticisation of Black masculinity that defensively projects a nonchalant attitude common in other Black footballing autobiographies, such as Vince Hilaire's 2008 *Vince - The Autobiography of Vince Hilaire*[11] and Mark Walters' 2018 *Wingin' It*.[12] In choosing to present the personality of a Black footballer in this way, unconsciously or not, the ghostwriters reaffirm a lazy characterisation of Black players that would have certainly impacted on the perception of their work ethnic by prospective football managers and chairmen.

Akinfenwa continues to defend his impulsive demeanour on and off the football field by stating, 'I'm not a pussy. I never will be' (Akinfenwa 2017: 3). The narrative voice here simply ventriloquises a heteropatriarchal discourse and confirms a masculine stereotype with little or no personalised insight. Although seemingly a reflection on self, the inclusion of the

[11] Ghostwritten by Tom Maslona.
[12] Ghostwritten by Jeff Holmes.

evocative expletive 'pussy' appears to be an ill-fitting celebration of masculinity and compounds the notion of Akinfenwa being a beast, a representation that the title and front cover both appear to unhelpfully enforce. Throughout the book, the first-person 'I', notwithstanding this pronoun being an expected address within the ghostwritten autobiography, serves as a frustratingly repetitive feature that gestures towards the personal whilst not providing insights that would allow the reader to delve deeper into Akinfenwa's backstory, including his relationship with his parents, siblings, school friends and teachers. Contradictions are not addressed as complexities. While he states that 'some of the teachers thought I was a bully because a lot of the younger kids who I played football with would come up and give me sweets, just because I let them play with me' (Akinfenwa 2017: 33), he also notes how: 'school reports always said I was charming and I smiled a lot' (Akinfenwa 2017: 34).

These assertions of self, place all the onus on Akinfenwa's apparent flaws instead of presenting the nuanced contextual detail that would have undoubtedly affected his years growing up in that particular inner-city environment. The syntactical repetition and terse sentences ultimately create a stagnated, choppy reading style that does not convey or correspond with the lucidity of expression that would be more representative of Akinfenwa's charismatic off-the-field personality that has seen him become a much-loved and highly regarded pundit figure in football.

Pennant's signing for Liverpool in 2006 was certainly the highlight of an impressive career on paper and was to prove a definitive and life-changing move for the then twenty-three-year-old winger. He had joined Liverpool from recently relegated Birmingham City, and as Pennant details in an exchange with the then Liverpool manager, 'the first thing Rafa Benitez did when I signed was to say:

> "I want you to write down all the negative stuff that surrounds you." It was like a brainstorm. I remember putting down the first thing: going out. Why do you go out? Girls. He got me to put everything down: crap friends, crap lifestyle and crap around me. (Pennant 2018: 123)

This candid, though rather sad admission, seems to be Pennant trying to atone for his troubled personal history. Even though his move to a huge football club like Liverpool should have been life-changing, Pennant admits that 'all the time, in the background, [I] was so worried that [my] past would catch up with [me] and ruin everything' (Pennant 2018: 123). Refreshingly, the tone in these sentences does allow for the much-needed, somewhat revelatory, post-career reflexivity that is likely to evoke an empathy fitting of the anecdote presented to us. In addition to what the reader knows about Pennant's difficult upbringing, there is a truthfulness to this outpouring that is to be felt emotionally. Yet there is also something uncomfortable about the most successful episodes in his life being framed by these negative experiences, as if the story of Pennant's life cannot but be determined by the dominant racialised narrative of a dysfunctional, deprived Black family and a context of pervasive criminality.

In more ways than one, it seems that Pennant has been considerably let down by his ghostwriter and the publishers, especially given that he openly struggled with mental health problems throughout his career. The deficiency of descriptive particularity and lack of attention to detail in terms of both the telling of his life story and in the production of the book suggest a lack of care about 'getting things right'. *Mental* subscribes to a narrow narrative of Black masculinity and not only fails to tease out the humanised story that Pennant's journey as a footballer deserves but also shows no interest in this story beyond presenting the self often foregrounded by insalubrious off-the-field antics.

Whilst most ghostwritten football autobiographies are not primarily concerned with literary fluency in the presentation of the 'self', some of the opening sections of "*It's Only Banter"* show a more distinctive literary quality that revivifies the language to invoke particularly vivid imagery of Rosenior's experience of trying to make it to the professional game as a young Black man from South London:

> I'm on the 220 bus, sitting on the top deck but feeling on top of the world. We creep through south-west London. Plush houses, the river, rowing clubs, affluence. We cross Putney Bridge and stop in the afternoon traffic. I turn to my left and there, looming over Bishops Park and the murky, brown Thames are four floodlights. (Rosenior 2017: 40)

While the phrase 'on top of the world' feels a little clichéd, sadly typical of the writing quality usually found within the ghostwritten autobiographies of Black footballers (and others too sometimes), the opening paragraph to this chapter is, on the whole, richer, more evocative and more refreshingly novelistic than some of the examples previously examined. The list of nouns which concludes with the abstract noun 'affluence' is especially profound, and thematically heightens the social chasm between Rosenior with his working-class background and the moneyed environment of the pockets of South London he ventured through on his way to training or matches. The key to its resonance is rooted in its choice of vocabulary such as 'creep' and 'looming' which set the scene and evoke a particular tone where it would be easy for Rosenior to feel out of place. It is a scene that ends with Rosenior spotting the lure of the floodlights, arguably, a metaphor foreshadowing bigger and brighter things to come in his professional career.

Further examples of vivid and continued prose linked to the presentation of the self and selfhood are to be found in *"It's Only Banter"*, including from near the beginning of the book when Rosenior describes himself and his relationship with the beautiful game:

> A young man with something to prove. That's what I am. Yes, I've made it, kind of. I'm a professional footballer. A teenager living his dream. A young man who wakes up, goes to work, plays football (the game I have always loved) and for my trouble, I get paid. Each weekend I run out in front of thousands and do my best to score goals and win matches. When I do my job, these fans sing my name. Me, young Leroy Rosenior from Clapham. *Leroy, Leroy, Leroy*. (Rosenior 2017: 15)

But although the writing here employs a range of linguistic techniques, including simple sentences, syndetic listing, asyndetic listing and typographical variation – with the italicised repetition at the end – to demonstrate Rosenior's love of the game, this very voice-driven extract ultimately lacks the precision and conviction that it has the potential to draw out here. This means that the imagery conjured is unlikely to linger long in the reader's mind in its attempts to characterise Rosenior as it leans too heavily on the formulaic template structure stylistically of what is so often seen in these works in an attempt to mimic authenticity. The conversational tag of 'Yes', followed by the informal phrase 'I've made it, kind of' lacks the

originality and richness required on the first proper page of the autobiography to make this story feel as fresh, individual and authentic as it has the potential to be. Instead, the sentences feel leaden and uninspiring, something which is at odds with the achievement of the central character on the cusp of becoming a pioneering professional football player. The extract would benefit from the ghostwriter elaborating on some of the shorter sentences to furnish the work with the nuanced details that would provide an engaging particularity and allow the reader to see into the head and heart of the central subject with a greater sense of anticipation and investment to reveal truer feelings of what Rosenior really thinks he needs to prove and why.

Much later in the book, Rosenior offers a seemingly honest appraisal of his career:

> I have a slight limp to remind me of a hard playing career but even that is a source of pride. The wounds of battle if you like. My football career wasn't the most glorious or trophy-laden but it fills me with immense pride. Who knows what might have been had that knee injury not occurred just as I had made a regular habit of scoring goals in the top flight but I certainly don't dwell on it. Growing up in Brixton, I had dreamt of being a pro. I wasn't obsessed and I wasn't even the best player in my local kids' team, but I worked. I worked and I listened and I worked some more and in the end I can say that those dreams were realised. (Rosenior 2017: 169)

Overall, this is a rather refreshing and well-crafted self-analysis though perhaps uncomfortably loaded with the semantics of war to represent the trauma-slanted pain a Black footballer has to endure during their career and that they carry with them even when retired from the game. This is further evidenced in *The Acid Test*, as Clyde Best admits: 'I never saw much point in talking when there wasn't much to say […] I couldn't let racism destroy my game. I had to win my own battles.' (Best 2016: 104). He continues in this honest vain saying:

> I know some of my old team-mates like Trevor Brooking believe I should have imposed myself more, that if I reacted more often I might have been more successful. But I knew what the rewards were for me and how I had to attain them. I liked to play with touch and running off the ball, rather than using my physique. (Best 2016: 104)

With this last remark, it seems Best is keen to remind readers that not all Black men are beasts.

Conclusion

Overall, these ghostwritten football autobiographies present a missed opportunity for structuring empathetic engagement, or the kind of emotional rapport and connection that Baldwin calls for in the writer's capacity to 'create, the consciousness of the others' (Baldwin 1998, 347 quoted in Butorac). In their omissions and evasions, as well as their often sensationalist tone, the autobiographies discussed above ultimately fail to convey the backstory of the central subject's life in ways that could provide the reader with a fuller picture of the inherent tensions informing the life of the Black British man in the footballing context. As Andrew Cowan puts it:

> The relationship between the autobiographical and the fictional is similar, perhaps, to that between a tree and its roots […] but the tree is never a mirror image of the roots. It takes on a very different shape, a much fuller form, expanding upwards and outwards, growing leaves and blossom and fruit, perhaps becoming host to a whole ecology of a new connections. (Cowan 2013: 32)

However, in most instances, the tree that forms the finished autobiography when the central subject is a Black footballer from Britain does not blossom or flourish as it should, but instead, owing to its generalisations and limitations, distortions and evasions, the finished publication mirrors a bare tree already imagined in the racialised imagination of the dominant culture. The retelling is often either melodramatic and hyperbolic or fragmented and flat, and a more complicated and fuller depiction of the self and life at the centre of the story is largely omitted. By introducing elements of the subjects shunning education or emphasising their disjointed family structures and their brushes with crime without an accompanying comprehensive backstory, especially in the case of Jermain Pennant in *Mental*, the narratives unconsciously endorse unhelpful, highly racialised, tropes of the Black British male experience and appear to confirm a racist prejudice in both their articulation and content.

Unequivocally, the footballer's autobiography, with an objective to help inspire future generations, needs to be accessible for a readership that is likely to differ starkly to that of

literary fiction. All the same, work in this genre has the potential to do more than repeat the dominant, somewhat toxic, ideals of what is expected of a Black male footballer. The tendency to rely on linguistic and structural tropes to tell the story of these impressive footballing lives unhelpfully reinforces racialised representational dynamics and appears to show a lack of interest, and consideration, on the part of the ghostwriter to articulate the life story of these Black footballers in a manner that is more truthful to their individual experiences. Reading into these 'troubled' accounts, it becomes evident that in some way they all risk pedalling vicious stereotypes and suffer from 'white voicing' or a failed ventriloquism that signals an oppressive control over the framing of the life being told and results in the complicated truths of the subject's life remaining unexplored.

CHAPTER THREE: WHOSE SHOW?

Everything considered, there is just enough evidence to suggest that a well-written and rich portrayal of a Black or mixed-race footballer's life story can be achieved through the ghostwritten autobiographical genre. *Back from the Brink*, the autobiography of Paul McGrath, former Aston Villa, Manchester United and Republic of Ireland central defender of mixed-race descent, will be briefly analysed here as an example of how the life of a Black footballer (or footballer of mixed-heritage in McGrath's case) can begin to be articulated in a less generic fashion and provide a fairer and fuller narrative voice for the subject. *Back From the Brink* won a slew of awards including British Sports Autobiography of the Year and the William Hill Irish Sports Book of the Year following its release in 2006.

During his career, McGrath was the first Black captain of the Republic of Ireland national team, and was also the recipient of the PFA 'Player of the Year' award in 1993. Born in Ealing, West London in 1959 to an Irish mother and a Nigerian father, McGrath was given up for fostering in Ireland when he was four years old owing to his mother's fears of raising an illegitimate interracial child in strict, conservative Catholic Ireland. Unlike some of the aforementioned works, *Back from the Brink* is in fact, for the most part, a rich and imaginative work. According to the book jacket, ghostwriter Vincent Hogan has a journalistic background and was the Chief Sports Feature Writer with the *Irish Independent* and named Sportswriter of the Year for 2000. In the acknowledgments section of the autobiography, McGrath writes, 'a special thanks to all who contributed to the compilation of this book, particularly to Vincent Hogan who I believe has managed to bring wonderful shape and clarity to a story that has, up to now, been largely muddied.' This is an indicator of sorts that the writing of the autobiography was a collaborative process and perhaps even suggests that McGrath himself compiled the bare bones of his own story which were then tidied, ordered and shaped into the finished work.

The first chapter of *Back from the Brink*, titled 'Borstal Boy', opens in dramatic fashion, avoiding the usual factual preamble and instead utilising *in medias res* with almost cinematic clarity to create suspense for the reader from the outset:

> I am sitting in a cubicle, the width of a Portaloo, handcuffed to the side. A fist keeps thumping the panel by my head. A voice keeps searching. 'Who's in that one? Who's in there? Cat got your fucking tongue, mate? Doors are banging. The fumes of the prison van carry up through the floor. Someone screams that we're going to suffocate in here. I am headed for Manchester Crown Court. Humiliated and trembling (McGrath 2006: 5).

This opening provides an example of how richer writing can be achieved by fostering a degree of mystery and suspense. Even though the first person 'I am' is immediately employed, the rest of the opening sentence is syntactically crafted and the lexical choices build tension, evoke intrigue and present a vivid image for the reader with arresting visual details. The reference to McGrath being 'handcuffed' evokes immediate imagery which foreshadows the troubled life of the Irish international; the central subject has his hands tied, in every sense. The omissions of proper nouns, as evidenced in Akinfenwa's autobiography, for example, allows for greater novelistic nuance allowing for a more free-flowing, seamless reading experience that is likely to chime with the reader more broadly and build a stirring sense of suspense.

Even though, similarly to Pennant, McGrath experienced a number of public struggles and the occasional run-in with the law during the course of his professional career, and following his retirement too, the ghostwriter manages to conjure a richness of story that is likely to evoke the reader's sympathy in a more sensitive manner. The opening paragraph offers a less generic opening to the life story of this footballer with a number of tragic struggles in his life informed by particular novelistic traits that make for a captivating and engaging read. There is an almost tangible energy in the writing with the inclusion of words such as 'fist', 'fumes', 'prison', 'screams' and 'suffocate' to evoke a sensory energy as well as an ominous tone from the very beginning of the book.

Much like a novel told from different perspectives, if pragmatically plotted, multi-voiced autobiographies utilising different points of view at different times within the work to reposition the reader can be conducive to fashioning a fuller picture of the central subject's life and provide a panoramic perspective of the protagonist. In *Back from the Brink*, McGrath's biological mother, Betty, helps provide greater context surrounding the early life

of infant Paul and the difficulties both she and her son faced daily in trying to survive in Catholic Ireland. It is a few chapters in when the perspective first shifts and the autobiography of McGrath allows for an introduction from Betty: 'My name is Betty McGrath. You don't know me and, in many ways, I don't want you to' (McGrath 2006: 30). Even though a succession of short phrases is employed to introduce Betty and her story, a familiar and rather limiting trait in many of the autobiographies examined, here there is an emotive poignancy beyond the syntactical simplicity. Building on from this initial gesture, Betty's story begins to provide some context around the challenges of her life growing up in Ireland and the years following the birth of her mixed-heritage son. The tone of the opening sentences that foreground Betty's recalcitrance immediately conjures a sense of intrigue, urging the reader to read on, despite her futile attempts to deter us, and find out more about her apparently harrowing story. As novelist Andrew Cowan observes, 'this technique of leaving things unsaid invites the reader to imagine the rest, to fill in the gaps, and in this way – sentence by sentence – the reader becomes a partner in the construction of a story's meaning' (Cowan 2013: 50).

As Betty's story continues, further evidence is given of assured linguistic flair and writing with vivid conviction:

> The world I see frightens me. I never venture out after dark. I hate being away from home. I read the newspapers, I watch the television news. It seems to me there are so many damaged people making headlines. I wonder, sometimes, how Paul is still alive. I wonder how he comes through so many scrapes still sane and relatively healthy. (McGrath 2006: 30)

Even though Betty's emotional outpouring is highly personal, it offers a refreshing perspective within this genre as a narrative voice that is emotive, heartfelt and seemingly authentic while skilfully interspersed with retrospection and sadness. The vocabulary employed, 'frightens', 'venture', 'dark', 'damaged,' lends texture in describing the discomfort experienced. This stirring uneasiness is further evidenced by McGrath's own narration: 'Routinely, my father's temper invaded the house and we'd retreat from it, listening to him roar at Mammy, worrying that he might take offence at the slightest move or sound' (McGrath 2006: 30). The inclusion of more traditionally literary features such as

repetition and metaphor – also regularly utilised in poetry – add greater texture to the writing within the autobiography, providing the evocative imagery that makes the reader feel something more profound.

For the most part, this footballing life is refreshingly described with more nuance offering a very different balance between the professional and personal life in this account. The opening of the second chapter of *Back from the Brink,* begins with the line 'Ipswich, November grey. Handshakes. Back slaps. "Well played big man…" Lies' (McGrath 2006: 16). Despite the brevity, similar in style to the opening of Akinfenwa's *The Beast,* there is much more depth in both the syntactical and lexical choices that the ghostwriter has employed here to exude a particular tone, one that suggests an aching sense of defeatism and an ominous foreshadowing of the emotive story that is to follow. There is a pervading sense of a career declining and mistrust. The short sentence 'Lies' is particularly poignant. There is a debilitating perception that footballers, especially Black footballers, are infallible, a damaging mischaracterisation that is carried with them on and off the football field. As Free writes about McGrath, 'through football he identifies with an abstract, "hard" masculine ideal through bodily performance, so winning respect, admiration, support and acceptance from his orphanage days onwards' (Free 2010: 51). These toxic ideals of Black male impermeability and almost celebrity-style infallibility do not equip the reader to explore the deeper complexities that subvert this notion. As JJ Bola writes in *Mask Off*, 'it is very hard to detect that they [Black sportsmen] may be suffering when we see them on the pitch… acting 'strong'' (Bola 2019: 99). Fostering a greater sense of insight and reflexivity around the themes of men's mental health and toxic masculinity would help provide the contemplative texture that is often missing from the autobiographies as they currently exist.

Overall, *Back from the Brink* is a far better example of how the life story of Black or mixed-heritage footballer can be retold, employing judicious choice of vocabulary and appropriate linguistic features to captivate the reader in a way that appears to truthfully represent the complex experience of being a Black footballer. Although not entirely perfect, in a number of ways, *Back from the Brink* is a marker of how autobiographies of Black British footballers can be written and offers some helpful models of the ways in which a ghostwriter might attempt to articulate the life of the central subject. However, subsequent to its publication in 2006, too many autobiographies of Black footballers still resort to the habitual and damaging

tropes of narration.

My novel *Your Show*, charts the life and career of former Premier League football referee Uriah Rennie, depicting his journey from rural Jamaica where he was born in 1958, through his migration to an impoverished part of Sheffield in the early 1970s, to his rise through the ranks as a football referee while burdened by the responsibility, racial abuse and professional politics that comes with being a Black man growing up in Britain at that time. Even in Rennie's case, there often seems to be a drive to preserve the ideal of football and a tactic to endure racism at a personal level as a means of (hopefully) overcoming it in the longer term. Uriah Rennie said himself in an interview in 2020 with the *Daily Mail*:

> I want to make sure that people have at least the same opportunity that I supposedly had. But more importantly, that everybody has the same opportunity in the community so nobody is disproportionately affected purely because of who they are or the colour of their skin. (*Daily Mail* 2020)

This is a sentiment with obvious connections to the words of Raheem Sterling and Clyde Best quoted earlier in this paper, reinforcing in similar terms, the uncomfortable notion that Black footballers – and in the case of Rennie, personnel involved in the sport more widely, i.e. referees – are somehow forced to endure the abuse from those in the stands and terraces to make the arena better for those who come after them. This sentiment is epitomised by Clyde Best's reflection in *The Acid Test*:

> Every time you played an away game it was a challenge. I kind of built myself up for it ahead of time and just tried to ignore it. It's easy to react to monkey chants and bananas being thrown at you. (Best 2016: 71)

Best's approach was guided by his hope of eradicating racism, or at least diminishing its presence for future generations on the field, a hope he clearly states in the prologue: 'what I was doing would serve as a barometer for generations to come. If I could make it better for black people coming into the game, that was success enough in itself' (Best 2016: xv). Regrettably, football history has shown that Best's strategy was not effective and the racist abuse of players continues today.

Writing about the life of a relatively well-known Black sportsman comes with its challenges, as I experienced first-hand, even as a Black man myself writing my novel *Your Show* based on the life and career of Uriah Rennie. Navigating the countervailing perceptions of Black masculinity as presented in the media and wider society means that any writer choosing to articulate a Black life, or write about the Black experience, must in some way reflect seriously on what constitutes the truth, rigour and linguistic style of their approach. As novelist JJ Bola writes in his book *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined*, 'professional male athletes are often seen as the apex of men's masculinity' (Bola 2019: 98). As mainstream footballing autobiographies testify, there are many examples where writers unhelpfully compound the potentially damaging illusion that Black men involved in sport are hyper-masculine by nature rather than being high performance athletes and framing their narratives around this racialised idea to the detriment of the overarching life story.

In most cases when penning a biographical novel – as opposed to a more traditional biography or even ghostwritten autobiography – the desired outcome for the author is to create something broadly more novelistic than a forensic, factual blow-by-blow portrayal of the central subject's life from cradle to grave. As academic Michael Lackey states in the introduction to his book *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions Across the Globe,* 'authors of biofiction do not pretend to give readers unadulterated historical or biographical truth' (Lackey 2019: 7). Irish author Kevin Barry, in conversation with novelist Stuart Kane talking about the process of writing *Beatlebone,* his biographical novel that centres on John Lennon, posits that 'there are different measures of truth that you can achieve in the page' (Lackey 2019: 7), a comment which seemingly assumes that the author will adopt literary flexibility with life facts.

While writing his book about Lennon, Barry posed the question, 'Is the spirit of the book right?' (Lackey 2019: 30). The abstract nature of the question at the centre of Barry's thoughts implies that the author must conjure something intuitive and intangible when writing about another's life and that the facts acquired about the subject may be adapted significantly to construct a portrait of a person that is rich, vivid and true in 'spirit'. However, this creative process, in which the true facts of the central subject's life are treated more flexibly, is more complicated when telling the story of a Black life that for too long has been

the subject of racialised narration and overlaid by the tropes of the colonial imagination and its legacies. I was aware that Rennie's life deserved more rigorous and sensitive treatment, both structurally and linguistically. As a riposte to the usual problematic narrative tropes employed by ghostwriters or authors writing about a Black life, I was aware that a writer can empower the Black story by steering clear from the ill-conceived stereotyped narratives and this was something I was constantly grappling with when writing about Uriah Rennie in *Your Show*.

Rennie's story as a pioneering Black referee is a precious one, and this is the first publication about him of its kind. Given these factors, initially at least, it was important for me to remain as close to the truth as possible. Apart from the occasional moment, I refrained from embellishing the true events in Rennie's life and career and instead undertook the process of fictionalising the facts either obtained through interviews, or researched material, as ethically and sensitively as apt. However, as the novel evolved, the lack of recorded material actually provided the opportunity to employ more creative licence and lean into the novelistic traits that were already emerging in the process of composition.

Throughout the writing of *Your Show*, I employed deliberate measures to distance the novel from the traditional ghostwritten sporting autobiography, whether that be the autobiography of a Black footballer or indeed one of the rather limited autobiographies by the former professional referees themselves, for example, Jeff Winter, Graham Poll, Mark Halsey and Howard Webb. By incorporating more familiarly conventional novelistic traits in my work, I was able to explore the nuances and 'liminal but discontented imaginary space' (Free 2010: 46) of the central subject's life more freely than the conventions of a more familiar autobiography allow because, as Barry states, 'the traditional biography is hemmed in by the facts' (Lackey 2019: 26). The measures I took to negate my concerns about accuracy included a non-linear timeline, not adopting titled chapters, and experimenting with how the words look aesthetically on the page with the inclusion of teamsheet formations and overtly poetic sections. These decisions, demonstrating a novelistic freedom, allowed me to open up the possibility to readers of reading about a Black sportsman in a way that differs to the experience of reading a more familiarly structured autobiography. As Barry argues, 'biographical fiction can go into the minutiae, and you can bring the character down into very small moments that […] illuminate in some way their personality' (Lackey 2019: 26).

CONCLUSION: 'WHOSE STORY IS THIS?'

As with all commercially-driven forms, there are different demands to be negotiated in the football autobiography and a finely-poised balance should be obtained in the writing of an autobiography of a Black subject for it to be considered a successful retelling. As Free argues, 'the persona discursively constructed is the textual outcome of interplay between the individual discursive construction of subjectivity and social national discourses mediated by the writer' (Free 2010: 48). Responding to the work of Phillips, Olusoga and Burdsey, discussed previously, it is apparent that widescale structural changes and a wider ideological shift are required before the social and national discourses relating to Black people are subjected to critique and transformed. Indeed, this is the most fundamental work in terms of changing and expanding the narrative possibilities for rendering the multiplicity and complexity of Black British lives.

At the same time, the narrative of a footballing life must be accessible to the wide-ranging football fan readership because this is the primary target audience of any autobiography past or present. Currently, the reader's desire to learn more about the central subject, or to reaffirm details and anecdotes that they might have already come across, often supersedes the written quality of the book. Secondly, it might be practical that the writing should, in many ways, respond to the readers' expectations of the Black experience by acknowledging aspects of Black British culture that foreground the early life and contextual background of the subject. The first two suggestions are perhaps the easiest to implement and are very often present in the existing publications that represent the lives of Black footballers. Thirdly, however, is the aspect which is often omitted in the life stories of Black footballers, until now at least – that is to fashion a story that explores the 'liminal spaces' and allows for sincerer novelistic nuance. Where possible, the writing could try to creatively embed everyday anecdotal and individualised experiences and interactions with friends, partners and family – adding the domestic dimension alongside the feelings they had, the books they read or music they listened to that shaped their formative years. For the writing to convey authentic lives, deeper contemplation is required to furnish the work with the desired texture to make the work both believable to the reader and to do justice to the life of the subject and these relatively simple additions already work towards rendering a different, arguably more sympathetic inner character. Given the current dominance of a flattened, clichéd and

hackneyed narrative of exceptional Black male lives made possible by footballing success that results in autobiographies of questionable political and literary quality being published on a regular basis, a new approach is needed. This approach would utilise the appropriate linguistic and structural techniques needed for elegance and fluency while also drawing on the appropriate contextual history needed to articulate the life story of the central subject in a manner that is accessible and engaging to its target readership – and hopefully those outside too – in a sensitive and illuminating manner.

My work in this critical component of this dissertation has been to explore how a reliance on over-determined and under-researched ideas of a black footballing life story has resulted in autobiographies that reinforce an uncomfortable stigma of being Black, male and British in the modern context. At the heart of this argument is the central concern and critical interest in how far the voices heard and experiences related in these works, presented as the autobiographies of Black footballers, are based on the detailed substance of the lives of the individuals on which they focus and how far they simply rehash and reinscribe familiar narrative tropes of an exceptional Black figure against the odds. In pursuing these lines of enquiry, the thesis has identified incongruous elements concerning the process of ghostwriting the autobiography of a Black footballer. The football autobiography suffers from problematic limitations as a form which often restrict the ghostwriter and lead to a conformity featuring outdated tropes that preclude any close engagement with a subject's life. The works are often penned by writers with primarily journalistic backgrounds who have shared little life experience with those whose lives they are tasked to articulate. Coupled with the fact that they have never played football professionally, they are unlikely to bring much valuable insight to a first-person narrative.

While the critical element of this dissertation focuses on the limitations of and contexts for the current problematic profile of Black footballing autobiographies, my creative element explores how it might be possible, using the novel form, to craft a truthfulness that is both fitting to the subject's life and that makes for an enjoyable reading experience. One prerequisite for more sensitive and searching work is an ongoing conversation between subjects and their ghostwriters to avoid the generalised representations that limit the depiction of the central subject's experience. In 2021, in the context of further racialised hostility, including increasing abuse of Black footballers online and on the terraces (as seen

in stadiums across Europe in recent years), this dialogue is becoming ever more important. Many Black football players and fans alike feel that 'taken in its entirety, it's difficult to assert that the game has made the kind of progress it very often claims for itself' (Onuora 2015: 303). As Onuora's words suggest, there is work to do to reach equality in the footballing sphere for Black players and to rid the so-called 'beautiful game' of centuries of institutionalised racism. In *The Uncomfortable Truth About Racism*, even John Barnes admits that 'verbal racist abuse is actually the least destructive or impactful dynamic of racism. It is the structural, insidious, systemic, unseen and unheard racism that […] we need to eradicate first' (Barnes 2021: 35).

It may be that a different mode of telling the life stories of Black footballers, even within ghostwritten autobiographies, can be part of a programme to address wider inequalities that exists outside the football field. Given its popularity as a genre, the footballer's autobiography has the potential to transform the cultural messages about Black male lives in such a way as to have a positive outcome for readers and future generations. Certainly, in the aftermath of inhabiting a 'hostile environment' and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, it is timely to create a change in the identities represented in the autobiographies of Black British footballers. How might this change happen? Ghostwriters could make a conscious decision to disrupt the old narrative codes of the works that have preceded them and learn more about the Black British male experience with which their autobiography connects and to provide a fuller, more nuanced depiction of the footballer's life, reminding themselves constantly during the writing process to ask 'whose story is this?' When and where possible, there also needs to be more of an obvious opportunity for the Black footballer to assert their authority over the publication of their autobiography. They need to be able to retain agency and control over their own life story because in its current guise, the autobiographical works leave little room for the genuine nuances of the Black experience which differ in each case and usually deviate significantly from the archetypal personally-troubled footballer narrative that has now become commonplace.

Giving ghostwriters more exposure and coverage may also make a difference. If there is more at stake for the ghostwriter of a Black footballer's life, then perhaps greater care might be taken to ensure it is well written. As it stands, the ghostwriter's own racial and gendered identity position and social power is too often removed from the stories and backstories of

footballers of colour resulting in an apparent lack of accountability for those behind the work. Furthermore, in its current form, the issue of the 'white gaze', drawing heavily on the dominant racialised discourse from a position of power and privilege, leads to 'white voicing' within the autobiographies studied. This provokes significant questions around the perceived authenticity of the central subject's story being presented. It could even be argued that the 'true' version of the Black footballer's story remains largely untold within their so-called autobiographies.

There are a number of methods a ghostwriter could attempt to begin to articulate the life of a Black footballer without resorting to the damaging tropes that subconsciously discriminates and racialises the story of the central subject. There is a great deal that a ghostwriter could learn by reading the works of Phillips, Olusoga, Onuora and Bardowell, and others, to understand the deep sense of 'unbelonging' that is never really eradicated from the psyche of Black men and that ultimately shapes their existence (both on and off the football field). It might also prove beneficial to observe the way Black footballers utilise other platforms, including the astute use of social media and radio in response to wider personal and political issues. Former footballer and now TV and radio broadcaster Ian Wright's 2020 appearance on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* could almost be viewed as a new form of autobiography. In his emotional conversation with the show's host Lauren Laverne, Wright openly discusses how he left school at fourteen, spent eighteen days in prison in 1982 for failing to pay fines and driving without a licence, and how he credits one particular teacher, Mr Pigden, for changing his life, to the extent, that he dedicated his 2016 autobiography *A Life in Football* to him. This appearance and the refreshing honesty on show seems like a potentially positive step forward in how a Black footballer, past or present, can take ownership of their life story and retell it in a fashion that is honest, sincere and engaging to consume.

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