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Opinion

# **This is a Britain that has lost its Queen - and the luxury of denial about its past**

Tuesday 13 September 2022, by [HIRSCH Afua](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2022).

**So long as she reigned, the establishment was able to gloss over the horrors of empire. Now is a time for painful truths**

his will be remembered as a watershed moment in British history for two reasons. First, for the death of [Queen Elizabeth II](#). Second, for what happened next: the voices of those colonised in the name of the British crown being heard, not as a fringe, exceptional view, but as a clamouring chorus of global trauma.

I had prepared for this moment as a time when I would not be free. I have no idea how I actually feel about the passing of Queen Elizabeth – the only British monarch I have known in my lifetime – because for all my life deference and admiration have been drilled into me as mandatory.

I had expected that those of us minoritised in Britain would understand this as a test of our loyalty, patriotism and Good Immigrant status. We would therefore fall into two categories: those who sought to pass the test, by enthusiastically toeing the line of national mourning, and those too conscious of the harm Britain's power has caused, who would stay silent.

But it turns out that tone policing is no longer tenable. Social media have been saturated by the harrowing memories of a legacy the British establishment has refused to acknowledge. The plunder of land and diamonds in South Africa, crimes that adorned the Queen's very crown. The physical suffering that continues from [violence inflicted by her government in Kenya](#), even as her reign was celebrated for having begun there. The [scars of genocide in Nigeria](#), events that took place a decade into her rule. In Britain, minoritised people are remembering this Elizabethan era through the lens of the racism that was allowed to thrive during it. Shooting the messenger – the radio host and former footballer Trevor Sinclair was [quickly hung, drawn and quartered](#) for voicing this perspective – has failed to quell the tide of global truth-telling.

The burdensome task of truth-telling – to a hostile Britain more used to hearing that its past is glorious – has always fallen unequally on the descendants of empire. Yet as I write, our stories are continuing to be erased. During her reign, the BBC tells us, colonies "[gained independence](#)", but there's no mention of those who were imprisoned, shot and killed in the struggles – from the Gold Coast to Cyprus, India and Malaya – that were required to win it.

This trauma is not recalled with a single voice. One of the effects of the empire that Queen Elizabeth personified is that it is unevenly remembered within our communities. People who were enslaved were taught that their assimilation into the culturally superior empire was a form of advancement. Families such as mine in Ghana experienced the violence of colonialism, and were then educated to believe it was justified.

I will never forget visiting [Independence Arch](#) in Ghana. This was the nation proud to have been the first black African people to successfully break free from empire, and here was the physical focal point of that freedom – an archway bearing a symbolic black star. When I looked inside, I found a reality check: a plaque dedicated this freedom to none other than Queen Elizabeth II.

I understood it as a lesson that even in our freedom, we are not free. We are expected to be grateful for having been colonised. We are racialised, and then expected to prove that racism exists. Even as black British people continue to die at the hands of the state, such as the unarmed Chris Kaba, news of the [black community's mourning](#) is obscured by the more important story of royal mourning. To the extent that it's ever acknowledged that black lives matter, now is certainly not the time.

Yet I sympathise with those who feel the Queen's loss. Under her reign, many latched on to the stabilising sense of cultural continuity. To lose that is to feel disrupted and uncertain. For me, it's a familiar anxiety – Britain's empire by definition redrew boundaries, and swept aside generations of tradition. Our parents and grandparents were recruited to Britain for its benefit, the terms and conditions of which my generation are still trying to make sense. We know how it feels to lack cultural continuity. Others in Britain enjoyed it at our expense.

If continuity is an abstract subject, the other trappings of royal symbolism are more concrete. There were pompous reflections last week with the idea expressed in the Economist's obituary that the Queen "[came from good Hanoverian blood](#)". If that sounds like a white supremacist idea, that's because it is.

When I am attacked for applying reason to what is obviously an emotional situation, one of the allegations will be that I dare speak of race, when the real oppressor is class. And yet here we come to the other mainstay of royal ideology – the Queen was the class system personified. Her role, and that of the King who succeeds her, is to sit at the apex of a class system, in a hierarchy anointed by God. In some cases, it's hard to distinguish this from the idea that she was indeed a god herself – the British tabloids began seeing her [omnipresence in rainbows](#) and [old-lady-with-a-hat-shaped clouds](#) hovering benignly over the land.

Change has come, but the systems of race and class that delineate our destinies remain. The genius of our monarchy is that it transforms people who have the most to gain from dismantling those systems into passionate subjects of the Crown instead.

If it were possible to set all of this to one side, maybe I would like to mourn the Queen, the hard-working old lady who has been the symbol of my country for my, even my parents', entire lives. But I can't separate her from a reign that refused to acknowledge this reality, let alone attempt to change it.

Nor do I get to opt out of the emotional labour of processing the memories that other British people refuse to acknowledge. Until now. Last week, Britain lost the luxury of long-lasting denial, at the same time as it lost its Queen.

**Afua Hirsch**

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**P.S.**

• The Guardian. Tue 13 Sep 2022 06.00 BST:

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