

# Sunderland may not be like London, Cynthia Erivo, but neither is it like the Britain of old

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## Challenging racism wherever it expresses itself is not the same as disparaging a place because it is too white

‘A day out of Sunderland is a day wasted.’ [So claimed Charlie Slater](#), council leader in the 1970s, and a man known as “Mr Sunderland” to generations of Mackems.

Actor and singer Cynthia Erivo is unlikely to agree. [On a social media clip](#) taken from an appearance on the Amber Ruffin show on NBC in the US, Erivo compared different British cities she had visited. Manchester, she told her American audience, is “incredible because it feels like London”. Sunderland, though ... “You go to Sunderland and you’re like, ‘Where the fuck am I?’” The viral clip gets cut here. [In the full interview](#), Erivo continues: “I don’t know where I am. This is not where I live.”

Born and raised in south London, Erivo is one of the outstanding talents of her generation, having won both a Tony and a Grammy for her role in the Broadway revival of *The Color Purple*. Ten days ago, she was [appointed vice-president of Rada](#), the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

Over the past week, it is Erivo’s view of Sunderland, though, that has drawn attention. Some heard in the Amber Ruffin clip the “[fashionable liberal metropolitan disdain](#)” that had led to Brexit, or an expression of the [north-south divide](#). Others were more disdainful of the criticism, seeing merely [someone “cracking a joke”](#).

Erivo is not a politician or commentator, and she was taking part in a lighthearted interview. We should not impose too great a weight upon her comments, even given her new role as Rada’s vice-president. Nevertheless, the sentiments Erivo expressed, and the debate around them, reveal much about the ways in which we view towns such as Sunderland and the complexities and contradictions of our understanding of class, race, place and belonging. “I can imagine,” a friend said to me, “that if I were a queer black woman raised in Brixton, I might not feel at home in some areas of the UK.” In a similar vein, the [FT’s Elizabeth Pears tweeted](#) that “If you grew up in a city like London, Sunderland will look and feel a bit different. You will feel this acutely if you’re not white.”

“There is an irony in preaching about the importance of diversity but being averse to a place that ‘is not [like] where I live’”

I grew up in a Britain that was far more racist (and homophobic) than it is today, a time when racism was vicious and in your face. The historian David Olusoga, who grew up in a working-class family in Gateshead, just up the road from Sunderland, recalls in [his book \*Black and British\*](#) the terrifying experience of being driven out of his home in the mid-80s by “a sustained campaign of almost nightly attacks”, his family forced to live in darkness as the windows “were broken one by one, smashed by bricks and rocks” thrown by racists. Months later, having found new accommodation, Olusoga returned to his old house. Painted on the front door were swastikas and the slogan “NF Won Here”.

Britain, today, is a different place. Discrimination and bigotry still exists, whether in the labour market or in policing, but the visceral racism of a generation ago is thankfully much rarer. The NF and other far-right groups have certainly not won.

When I was growing up, there were many areas of town, many venues, I would not enter for fear of racial assault. That is simply not the case today. Yet, the sense that black people must necessarily be wary of a place like Sunderland remains deeply entrenched. [As one tweeter put it](#) in response to the Erivo interview, “I immediately took this as a comment on microaggressions and feeling uncomfortable as a Black person in a white-majority area”.

I have never felt racially threatened any time I have visited Sunderland. Certainly, it’s not like London (or Manchester or Liverpool), being whiter, older, poorer and more working class. [Almost 95%](#) of Sunderland’s population is white; just 1% is black and 3% Asian. [A recent report](#) from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that more than a third of the town’s children live in poverty.

But if Sunderland is not like London, neither is it like the Britain of old. The far right has certainly [attempted to exploit tensions](#) over asylum seekers and sexual violence in the town. There is, though, no reason to assume that because a town is more white or working class, it is necessarily more racist. There is an irony in preaching about the importance of diversity but being averse to a place that “is not [like] where I live” or which may “look and feel a bit different”.

Many people have an attachment to a particular place, whether London or Sunderland, and view such attachment as an essential aspect of their identity. What we should beware of, though, is the elision of “place” and “race”. Many on the right imagine that “white Britons” [have lost their “homeland”](#) because of the “ethnic transformation of the UK” and that London is now a “foreign” city because [“white Britons” are in a minority](#).

Anti-racists should not indulge in their own version of eliding place and race by showing contempt for a town because it is “white majority”. Challenging racism wherever it expresses itself is not the same as disparaging a place because there are too many white people.

At the same time, contempt for a town such as [Sunderland](#) is as likely to be shaped by perceptions of class as of race. Especially since Brexit, the view of the “white working class” as being especially ignorant or bigoted has become more entrenched.

Yet, the majority of black and Asian people in this country are also working class, and as a [2019 report](#) from the thinktanks Runnymede Trust and Class observed, despite “‘white working class’ and ‘ethnic or migrant working class’ ... being repeatedly pitched against each other in mainstream media and political discourse ... we found significant overlap in everyday lived experiences”. There was “a shared experience of precarity” and of “prejudice and contempt”, whether rooted in race, class or both. Or, to put it another way, the experiences of working-class people, whether white or minority, are distinct from those of middle-class people, whether white or minority, and contempt for working-class culture is not defined by race.

Sunderland is currently undergoing a huge [process of regeneration](#), to renew both its physical and its cultural fabric. Whatever the outcome, it will not be another London. But why should it be?

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