

Unfinished Conversations – Liverpool

Interviewee: Ashleigh Nugent

Interviewer: Elliss Eyo-Thompson

Director of Photography: Darren Brady

Date of interview: Friday 16th May 2025

Location of interview: Outside Prescott Police Station, 6 Derby St, Prescott L34 3LG and Shakespeare North Playhouse, Prospero Place, Prescott L34 3AB

Total length of recording: 26 minutes 33 seconds

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - Can you tell us what your name is, where you live and tell us a bit about the location that we are currently at.)

00:00:00 Ashleigh Nugent

So my name is Ashley Nugent, I am an author, a writer and I am the founder, director of Rise Up, Rise Up, a charity in which we help people to help people who are often at their lowest ebb to understand how to understand their own thoughts and feelings and behaviors and we'll be soon moving into the community around here with the Community Hub. We've been working in prisons for 10 years.

So that's my passion is writing and helping the community really and helping people at the lowest ebb like I once was. I live on the Wirral now, but I was brought up, I was born in Yorkshire, I was born in Beverley by Hull in Yorkshire. But I was brought up just in this area around here and we've chosen this location as the first place that we film because this is the old Prescott police station. This is the place where I was first arrested when I was 14 years old. I was arrested for riding a bike that belonged to a friend of mine, and the police accused me of stealing the bike even though they knew for a fact I hadn't stole it. And there were witnesses that saw the guy that did steal a bike, he was a well-known thief. I wasn't a thief, I was from a nice...a nice home, my parents had good jobs but from that day on the police had me on their radar as one of the only black lads in this area and I was harassed relentlessly for years and years and years. I used to come into this police station and bring four producers: that's a thing. Back then they used to pull you over and ask you to produce documents to prove that you are driving legally. I used to come in here and do four/ five producers at once. They had to produce within two weeks. so that means I've been pulled over and been given producers four or five times in the past two weeks on a regular basis, that's how intense it was. So that's why we've started here.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - Can you just say like this area is Prescott, its relationship to liverpool and where its situated.)

So, this is Prescott, this is Knowsley which is kind of getting to the outskirts of Liverpool. And where I was brought up from the time I was one years old is a couple of villages beyond here, there's Prescott then Whiston then Rainhill and then you're into St Helens. So really where I was brought up is really in the liminal lands, on the borders, on the periphery between two places which is exactly what my life seems to be all about.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - OK, so you spoke about getting arrested and stuff in your younger years. How do you see the connection between slavery, the prison system, and institutional racism in the UK?)

00:02:21 Ashleigh Nugent

With my organization, Rise Up we have worked for the past 10 years in prisons under the Criminal Justice System and the Probation Service. A third of the people in UK prisons are non-white. Half of those in youth prisons are not white, half. There is a massive over-representation of black people and non-white people in the Criminal Justice System in this country. And there's a reason for that and it's called racism.

I know this because I was harassed by the police from being a 14-year-old boy even though I grew up in a very nice leafy suburb. People nowadays like to talk as if it's all to do with class. Well, I was brought up in a middle-class suburb and yet me and my brother were harassed endlessly by the police. Obviously, class is an issue, race is also an issue, and they intersect. And obviously this racial system, it starts with the interactions between the Portuguese and the Spanish and the Dutch and French and British and so on with Africans on the west coast. And then eventually with the slave trade and then after the slave trade people confused the slave trade with colonialism but colonialism came later. It wasn't until the late 1800s, way after slavery had been abolished in Europe, that we started moving into the African interior and colonizing Africa. It wasn't until 1913, the year before the First World War, that we finished the colonial project in Africa and had by that time colonized every part of Africa apart from Ethiopia and Liberia. Liberia which had already been taken over by the Americans. So, Ethiopia really was the only part that wasn't colonized and during that time from around the 1850s onwards, we developed this kind of pseudo-science of race that placed white people at the top of the hierarchy and black people at the bottom and justified the colonial project. Justified Europeans going to Africa and other places and so-called civilizing people who needed us, they needed us to clothe them, to educate them, to civilize them and to give them the word of the Bible.

00:04:48 Ashleigh Nugent

And now we are living in a time where we are at the back end of that particular moment in history and people who look like me are coping with being those who were put on the bottom rung. But of course, I'm also mixed, so I associate my identity as part white, and part black. And that's really my role in the world is to bring those two worlds together.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - Can you tell us a bit about your family background)

00:05:18 Ashleigh Nugent

My family, my family come from runaway slaves on one side. So, when Jamaican my family Maroons, now Maroons fought two lengthy wars with the British. This is (inaudible) fighting against the best, the most organized, the most successful military force in the whole world at the time. And the British could not beat them. And this was about the 1720s, the Six Year War, then the 1790s, there was another war, and the British could not beat the Maroons again and they eventually gave them their autonomy. So as Maroons we gained our autonomy way, way, way before slavery was abolished.

On my mother's side we come from the workhouse, so we come from slavery on one side and the workhouse on the other side. So, my mother's mother was... her brothers were placed into a

workhouse because of debt and my mother's mother was sent to work as a maid. She was put into service and that's where she met my mother's father who was a butler. [laughs]

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - And is there anything you can say about your family's connection to Liverpool.)

00:06:33 Ashleigh Nugent

My family's connection to Liverpool really is me and my brother and sister as we, though we were born in Yorkshire, we were brought up here on the border on the periphery of Liverpool and obviously to those who live deeper in Liverpool we were classed as kind of woolly backs, not really from the city but Liverpool is our city. Liverpool is where we spent most of our time. Liverpool is where we developed our, me certainly and my brother developed our identities, it's where we started going out to nightclubs. it's where we started meeting other people and going into Liverpool 8 to meeting other black people. deliberately going to Granby Street when there was a vibrant Caribbean community in Granby back in the 90s when I was 14, 15, 16. It's where we really developed our sense of self, our sense of place, our understanding of who we are as black mixed-race people in this country.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - How and when have you learned about Liverpool historical connections to transatlantic slavery.)

00:07:23 Ashleigh Nugent

11 years in schools in this area, in the city that was the center of the slave trade, so there was a time at the height of the slave trade around the 1760s that around I think two-thirds of all the ships, all the slave ships leaving this, leaving the whole of Europe, look, two-thirds of the slave ships leaving this country left out of Liverpool. and I think around half of those leaving Europe left Liverpool. Liverpool really was the centre of the slave trade and yet 11 years in schools in this area on the outskirts of Liverpool, nobody mentioned slavery once.

Indeed, I can't remember a single history lesson where anybody mentioned not only slavery, not the history of Liverpool but also, no mention of any black or brown people. So, I was taught that no black or brown people did or achieved anything of significant, anything worthy of mention in a history class, in the whole history of civilization.

So, I knew nothing about my own history. My father also being from Jamaica and moving to England and moving his way up the ladder in the NHS facing all kinds of racism and all kinds of rumors about the relationship between him and my mother. Chose to deny those who tried to subjugate him because of his race. He chose deny them that power by ignoring it. That of course is not the way that my generation reacted to racism. But a lot of people of his generation responded by ignoring it a lot of the ones who succeeded because there was really nothing you could do, there was no one you could complain to, nobody was interested. So not only did they ignore it, he also didn't speak to us about it, so I knew nothing about African history. Nothing about Jamaican history. And nothing about what to expect as a black British mixed-race man until I went and started studying for myself after many embarrassing conversations and making myself look a fool for not understanding my own history and my own identity.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - Do you remember, if there any particular books or people when you started learning about it when did you did learn about transatlantic slavery.)

00:09:42 Ashleigh Nugent

You know around about 92/93 when I went to Jamaica and ended up in Jamaican prison, being beaten up in Jamaican prison for being the white boy in the underground dungeon in Jamaican prison. Around about that time I was a teenager, and I was discovering black culture, so at that time I still didn't really understand the history but there were artists like Bob Marley and reggae artists talking about Marcus Garvey and talking about slavery and like culture, talking about Arawaks and Maroons. And then there was rap artists who were really rebelling against the American system, it was mainly American rap artists, although there were some UK rap artists I was listening to at the time, like the Ruthless Rap Assassins from Manchester and Rebel MC, I love Rebel MC - *Black Meaning Good to Word, Sound & Power* to his jungle, stuff as Congo Natty is incredible. And these artists inspired me to start reading books. And the first book I really picked up, I went into Liverpool library which again has been a great inspiration in my life, the Central Library in Liverpool and I found a book that was simply called the Maroons, and it was about the Maroon Wars. The wars that my Jamaican family fought against the British. The world's most powerful, most successful military force. A band of runaway slaves fought them and were undefeated. And that book really changed my life, it gave me a kind of a sense of not only understanding but also pride in who I am and what my black history and culture is, and it encouraged me to dig deeper, to read further and to start watching anything that I could as well. And of course, when I was a child Roots by Alex Haley came on a telly as well, that was also a really, really big moment because that story of slavery in America had never been told.

00:11:45 – 00:12:14 Ashleigh in conversation

Oh damn, and as well, to show you the other problems, I'll be keeping the written record as well and there's no real reason, just some people might find it a bit strange that someone's doing that but it's just in case there's any problems with the camera or we need something just for continuity and then I can take it off or if we miss anything so it's not as far.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - Ok, can you tell us a bit about where we are, the location and why we are here)

{Footage transition from Prescott police station to Shakespeare North Playhouse}

00:12:14 Ashleigh Nugent

So, this is the Shakespeare North Playhouse, this is an amazing Shakespearean theatre, this is a cockpit theatre built on the original plans of a cockpit theatre, what used to be Henry VIII cockpit theatre located on what is now Downing Street. And this is a unique place globally and I helped to... well I co-curated the opening of this place because I was so passionate about this being located in the place that I moved away from when I was 21 in order to get into the arts because I felt like there was no culture around this area and no, I didn't know any people who understood what it was that I was trying to achieve as an artist, as a writer, then became a rap artist, I suppose you could call that a musician.

So, I moved away from this area and then decades later I'm in my 40s, I'm about to self-publish, I initially self-published my first book *Locks about* based on me being in prison in Jamaica. and I heard the opening of Shakespearean theatre in this very place that I moved away from. So that was a real full circle thing for me, and I've been involved with this place since its foundations, and it makes me emotional every time I walk into this beautiful space.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - How has the history of slavery influenced your creative or artistic work?)

00:13:33 Ashleigh Nugent

The history of slavery is integral to my creative work, so my first novel is based on, I think that really happened to me being in prison in Jamaica but me being a mixed-race boy from the outskirts of Liverpool where we are now, I knew nothing about black history. So I was going to Jamaica trying to find out what this black lad identity that had been foisted upon me from the time I was four/ five and people used to point out how I'm different or my family are different or my dad's black, colored was the term they'd use and half cast and then obviously other, more severe racial epithets would get used as we got older.

I was off to Jamaica trying to find out what that identity actually means if these people in England think I'm different. Why am I different? What does it mean to be a black lad, to be a black man. And obviously that history the reason why we are how we are is because of slavery. But also, in that book I talk about there's a scene where the character based on me, he's called Aeon he experiences a kind of a past life regression where he sees himself as a young girl on a beach. And that girl is a Taino girl. Now the Taino people were the original inhabitants of Jamaica when the Spanish first turned up in 1493.

So, my third book is going to be about the relationship between the Africans, the Spaniards and the Taino people who resided in Jamaica before the Europeans and the Africans turned up. And I really think it's important only to talk about the history of slavery and the kind of the history of colonialism that so few of us really understand very well. But also, to talk about the identity of us as British people and as mixed-race people and this mixed culture in which we live now. In these very confusing times things were so simple when I was growing up in the 70s, 80s and 90s, now everything's so confusing. And I think everybody in this country is starting to feel the way that I felt as a teenager like we don't really know what our identity is and really who we are and where we come from and therefore, we don't really know where we're going. So, we need to work out where we come from so we can figure out where we're going and studying the history of slavery is really integral to that. So, it was really the gift of being in prison in Jamaica for my 17th birthday and I say it was a gift because it was that moment that really helped me to understand what my purpose is in this particular life. in this particular body. having this particular identity. in this particular time.

So, I was brought up in this area on the outskirts of Liverpool in a leafy suburb were looking like me. being one of the only black interracial families in this area. I really did not fit in. this was 1993 and I thought that going to Jamaica would help me understand this black identity. and I thought this Jamaican culture the music the fashion everything really resonates with me. This is where I'm going to find who I am, find my sense of belonging.

but of course, being a mixed race light skinned boy from the suburbs. I did not fit in in Jamaica at all. I thought I was a rude boy, and I got in some trouble. and I got beaten up. I got stabbed. A couple of days later I got arrested. and I found myself in a Jamaican detention center. now whilst being in this place called Copse Place of Safety for Boys which was the least safe place I've ever been. I was locked up in an underground dungeon called the Strong Room. where the taps don't run and the toilets don't flush and you're in there 24 hours a day. This was a hellhole. and in there I was beaten unconscious for being the white boy. So that moment as difficult as it was in the days, weeks, months and years that followed that it really helped me to establish what I believe my purpose to be. which is to speak openly about what it really means to have my kind of identity, and I really do believe my kind of identity, this mixed-race identity is a really really strong analogy for the way that Britain is at the moment. this kind of identity confusion. Identity confusion is really important for our development. We have to go through the identity confusion to come out the other side as wiser, mature adults and that's what Britain now has to do. so that contrast of being the black lad in England but the white boy in Jamaican prison really established for me what it is that I need to achieve in this lifetime.

00:18:43 Ashleigh Nugent

There is no ideal way to describe my identity. So, whenever I do describe my identity, I'm aware that I am responding to the place in which I am in the times in which I live. so right now, in this particular context I would describe my identity as being a black mixed race British man. and I'm happy with all those identifications. and I'm proud of them. but obviously we are all so much more than any of these limiting taxonomic categories that we like to force each other into. We are so much more than any of those words can describe every single one of us. We are the universe. and that's not just mystical that's scientific just go and go and read some quantum physics [laughs]. I won't go into it, but we are we are all made of the same stuff. We all come from the same place we all go back to the same place. so, my identity is as an individual black mixed-race man British but also of something much much greater than that which is part of you and part of everything else that is and has ever existed.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - You've started talking about what ways do you think transatlantic slavery has shaped liverpool.)

00:20:07 Ashleigh Nugent

We can't really talk about the history of Liverpool without talking about the history of transatlantic slavery. And we shouldn't really talk about the history of the British empire without talking about transatlantic slavery. And Liverpool was really the capital of transatlantic slavery in Europe. So, Britain became the most active slaving country of all the western empires. And Liverpool was the busiest port by far by the height of the slave trade in the 1760s. Most of the ships leaving Britain that were involved with the triangular transatlantic slave trade were leaving from Liverpool and I think I'm right in saying about half of the ships leaving Europe were leaving Liverpool, that is how integral Liverpool was to transatlantic slavery, it was really the capital of the slave trade. So, we can't really even start to talk about Liverpool or the British empire without talking about transatlantic slavery.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - What role do you think artists and performers can play in challenging or reshaping how slavery is remembered?)

00:21:10 Ashleigh Nugent

I often hear people complaining. When the Will Smith movie where he plays Whipped Peter when that came out, I saw online people were complaining including black American people complaining and 'oh no not another film about slavery' as if there's been many films about slavery. I grew up in a time when there weren't any when all we had was the series, Roots. I also went to see Amistad when that came out at the cinema when that was kind of really the first mainstream movie that we had about slavery. And I have never seen anybody or heard anybody complain that we're making yet another film about the Holocaust or yet another film about the Great War or World War II. As soon as black people start talking about their history black people themselves are complaining to each other that we don't need to hear more of this stuff. As if it's negative just to talk about the facts of our history. Slavery is so little understood so misunderstood and so little talked about. And so integral to who we are in the western world. Slavery is integral to how we see the world in the western world in western Europe and America and in Britain. And integral to what the... the... the institutions the... the creative institutions the educational institutions and how the banks the money that set these things up largely came from slave trade and colonialism. And yet we know so little about it so that really is what I see is a really important aspect of my job as a writer to... to dig deeper and to tell stories that are relatable that people want to get involved with no matter what race they are to help us understand who we are.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - Are there any individual, heroes or communities that you think have been forgotten in the history of transatlantic slavery. Who are they?)

00:23:00 Ashleigh Nugent

So, I would say that when I talk about the maroons most people in this country don't really know what I'm talking about because there just aren't many books. There aren't stories. There aren't movies about this amazing fascinating people who managed to fight two, two lengthy wars two protracted wars with the British Empire. We are talking about a band of runaway slaves who fought two protracted wars with the most successful military force in the world at the time and were undefeated and gained their freedom way before slavery was abolished. So, the maroons and their history is really, really overlooked, and we need more stories and more books and more movies and tv shows that actually explain that really fascinating history.

And also, the Taino people and the original inhabitants of the Caribbean islands. Obviously, people people, used to use this term Indians but we're talking about Taino's and Caribs and Arawaks and the likes. People talk as if these people were wiped out by the Europeans. They weren't. They're still here now trying to be kept recognized. Trying to get themselves onto censuses so that their people are recognized as still being here now. And of course, their genetics are in people like me who are a mixture of the original Taino, Arawak, Carib peoples and African and European and Asian and North African. We are a mixed people. So, there's three groups really... the fascinating... the mixed people like me I think we stand as a really good analogy for western Europe and America as it is at the moment. And the kind of mix of cultures and the confusion that can come... the identity confusion that can lead to wisdom and insight if we dare to go through it. And the maroon people and the Taino and original Caribbean peoples.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson - So we are going to speak about freedom. So, what does freedom mean to you?)

00:25:15 Ashleigh Nugent

What does freedom mean to me? Freedom means really daring to be who you actually are. Freedom means being more honest more of the time. Freedom means having the courage of your own convictions. And really living what you believe your purpose to be in the here and now. Accepting that this is it. And really daring to say what you believe this to be I mean this is your chance to do what you came here to do now. The one thing that one of the things I fear the most is sitting in my rocking chair if I am lucky enough to become an old man and I get to sit in that rocking chair with my great, great grandkids if I'm lucky enough to get to that point the thing that I fear the most is the thought I didn't even dare to try.

I didn't even dare to really live what I believe to be my purpose or to be honest enough to say that I believe the world to be like this and it doesn't matter if anybody else agrees or disagrees. I believe the world to be like this. I believe this is what makes us human. I believe this is the point of me being here now and I'm gonna dare to say it. I've spent so many years pretending to be other things to try and appease other people [laughs] and now I'm doing my best to be more honest more of the time and that is freedom.

(Not included in video: Elliss Eyo-Thompson – If you describe freedom in three words, what would be the three words)

00:26:48 Ashleigh Nugent

If I had to describe freedom in three words. I would say something like I be universe. That's honesty.

END OF TRANSCRIPT