HOW TO LIVE
WITH EACH OTHER

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An Anthropologist's Notes on Sharing a Divided World

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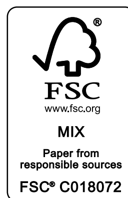

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Part I

TRIBE

Chapter One

JOURNEYS

How can we live with those who are different from us? This is an old question and a tricky one. It may also be the most urgent problem of the twenty-first century.[1] In recent years, crises of difference have begun to crash in successive waves. In 2017, in Charlottesville, USA, the young activist Heather Heyer is murdered by a white supremacist, as others chant 'you will not replace us'. In Lebanon and Turkey, over 3.4 million Syrian refugees who have arrived since 2011 face the threat of double displacement as their presence generates growing backlash. In 2019, in Johannesburg, simmering resentment against migrants erupts into riots, targeting migrant-owned businesses and a local mosque. In 2015, Dylan Roof carries out a mass shooting at a majority black church in South Carolina. In 2018, Robert Bowers does the same at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. In 2019, Brenton Tarrant kills fifty-one at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. All three are found to be immersed in radical nationalist movements. In Poland new laws, passed in 2018, clamp down on references to Polish involvement in the Holocaust, casting the nation solely as a victim. Across the past decade, tens of thousands of migrants drown trying to cross the Mediterranean, as anti-immigrant groups in the US and France raise money to charter ships to patrol the waters, convinced those struggling to make the crossing pose a civilisational threat – voicing hope that even more will be lost to the sea.

There is a story that we tell: that difference always carries

a threat. Whether marked by skin colour, nationality, religion, political camp or culture, this story tells us that living with others is inescapably threatening – that our own way of life risks being eroded by the ways others live. We imagine difference in terms of winners and losers, where, if others gain, we lose. This is not a story that we tell all the time, but it is old and familiar, and it has taken on many forms over the years. It sits at the foundations of Western democracy, informing our idea of citizenship, and most citizens will retell it in one way or another. Some may tell it about race or migration, imagining that the presence of newcomers or the economic success of minority groups poses a fundamental threat to their own interests. Others may tell it about political rivals, or those with different beliefs – imagining that the only way to respond to those who hold a different world view is to oppose them.

This story has tremendous power. It has this power, in part, because it is so well rehearsed. We tell this story over and over again, not only with words, but also in the designs of our cities, in the rules of our politics, in the ways in which we consume information. To call it a story, then, is not to say it is unreal. On the contrary, it becomes increasingly real in each retelling.

Democratic states are going through a major upheaval. In 2020, a major study from the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy found that most citizens of democratic states, worldwide, were dissatisfied with democracy. For a range of countries, including the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, Brazil and the United States, faith in democracy has reached an all-time low.[2] Democracies are struggling to deal with political difference. Sometimes they grow more polarised, as divides become intractable and voters are pulled towards extremes. Sometimes they fragment, as values, agendas and groups multiply and become ever more niche.[3] Below the surface of formal politics, notions of truth and the possibilities for consensus and cooperation are splintering. Citizens are developing increasingly

distinctive habits of media consumption, interaction and connection, pulling away from each other in profound ways.[4] Even in the face of seemingly global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, there is widespread disagreement over the realities we face and the solutions we need – over science and belief, and care and exploitation. Tangled with crumbling faith in democracy and public life, differences become volatile. Movements for racial justice clash with emboldened nationalist movements. Both clash with politicians eager to insist there was never any issue to begin with.[5]

The challenges these upheavals pose is clear. What is less clear is where they originate from. Are they the inevitable product of an increasingly interconnected and mixed world? Or are they, in the end, products of stories we tell about ourselves and the world around us?

I believe it's the second of these two. The way we imagine difference matters. And sometimes subtly, sometimes more overtly, democratic states have long imagined difference as a threat. But it doesn't have to be this way. This book investigates how this story, where difference and conflict are inextricably linked, came into being. It explores how this story gets acted out by democratic institutions and through the everyday habits of citizens. And, most importantly, it looks at how some citizens are finding ways to tell different stories about difference, radically transforming the democratic tradition from within. This is a book about the past, the present and the future – about an old, familiar story that we continue to repeat, but also about how we might rewrite the script.

The first time I visited Kilburn, it was to attend a 'pop-up university'. A group of artists, architects and academics had come together to run a series of events exploring the history, make-up

and politics of this busy corner of north-west London. The artists involved, I suspect, couldn't resist setting the scene a little. In the middle of the large, communal table around which the audience was gathered was a small display of books, knick-knacks and black-and-white photos of the neighbourhood – all set out on black cloth. At the centre, displayed like a religious tome, was an old architectural classic: *A Pattern Language*. Both the speakers and this book offered a similar message: places are defined by familiar patterns – a certain look to the shops and houses, certain trades and professions, certain places like parks, churches or community centres which bring people together in particular ways. To build a community meant recognising these patterns, learning how to draw on what was familiar and important, and then rearranging the elements.

Outside, after the workshop, I wandered down the Kilburn High Road, slightly baffled. If there was a pattern here, I was struggling to see it. The author Zadie Smith grew up near Kilburn, and the area provides the setting and inspiration for several of her stories. Here's how she describes a journey down the High Road:

> Polish paper, Turkish paper, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, *News of the World*. Unlock your (stolen) phone, buy a battery pack, a lighter pack, a perfume pack, sunglasses, three for a fiver, a life-size porcelain tiger, gold taps. Casino! […] Boomboxes just because. Lone Italian, loafers, lost, looking for Mayfair. A hundred and one ways to take cover: the complete black tent, the facial grid, back of the head, Louis Vuitton-stamped, Gucci-stamped, yellow lace, attached to sunglasses, hardly on at all, striped, candy pink; paired with tracksuits, skin-tight jeans, summer dresses, blouses, vests, Gypsy skirts, flares. Bearing no relation to the debates in the papers, in Parliament. […] The Arabs, the Israelis, the Russians, the Americans: here united by the

> furnished penthouse, the private clinic. If we pay enough, if we squint, Kilburn need not exist. Free meals. English as a second language. Here is the school where they stabbed the headmaster. Here is the Islamic Centre of England opposite the Queen's Arms. Walk down the middle of this, you referee, you![6]

The Kilburn High Road runs like a spine, south-east to north-west, with streets branching off either side, leading to terraced Victorian homes, maze-like social housing estates or imposing mansions. As Smith's breathless description suggests, Kilburn teems with difference, reflecting a long, layered history of migration and political transformation. In the late 1800s, it provided a home to Irish families fleeing famine and Jews fleeing persecution who were often unwelcome elsewhere. Following the Second World War, they were joined by new arrivals from across Britain's current and former colonies who migrated in response to major British labour shortages and an urgent need to rebuild. Faced with prejudice and hostility, new arrivals often drew on informal networks of accommodating landlords and willing employers established by earlier migrants to find a foothold in the city.[7] In doing so, different generations of migrants got to know one another, establishing new connections, new identities, new ways of living. Today, Kilburn's diversity has multiplied even further, making it into a site of what the anthropologist Steven Vertovec calls 'superdiversity'.[8] Older Jewish, Irish and Caribbean migrants rub alongside more recent arrivals from Africa, the EU and South America, bringing with them different histories, faiths, languages, understandings and hopes.[9] Kilburn is not simply a place where the white British population is in the minority. It is one where no single group dominates and where our very language for describing difference seems to fray at the seams.

As these migrant histories build up, familiar categories break

down. Many of the migrants arriving in the UK after the Second World War had been taught by colonial schools and administrators to view the UK as the 'motherland'. For them, migration was imagined partly as a sort of homecoming – an understanding supported by the fact that they arrived as full British citizens. When the ship *Empire Windrush* pulled into port on 21 June 1948, carrying the first group of post-war migrants from Jamaica, the London *Evening Standard* reported the event with the headline 'WELCOME HOME!'[10] In Kilburn, older migrants from India or Jamaica would sometimes nostalgically conjure up these feelings of connection and belonging.

In 1962, however, the UK rescinded the citizenship of most colonial and post-colonial subjects, and spent the subsequent decades creating ever-tighter restrictions on migration. Many of those who arrived after this point did so on the basis of 'family reunification'. For such migrants, life in Kilburn was not necessarily a matter of a general connection to the area, but characterised by one's place within relatively tight-knit networks of family and community.

In 1981, the UK government made it possible to strip British citizenship from people with migrant backgrounds – even if they themselves were born and raised in the UK – if their presence was deemed 'not conducive to the public good'.[11] Today, young people in Kilburn – the children or grandchildren of migrants – struggle to pin down what being British means to them. They feel at home in Kilburn, London and the UK, but they also know that unlike their white British counterparts, these roots could be pulled away at any moment. These layered histories of migration and citizenship shape different feelings of belonging, different identities and different ways of living. They make it difficult to talk about diversity simply in terms of national origins, as if all those from the Caribbean, Brazil, China or wherever else formed uniform, like-minded groups.

The difference that swirls through Kilburn, however, is not

just a product of migration. Surrounded by affluent neighbourhoods, Kilburn is a patchwork of different classes, professions and circumstances – from refugees to retail workers, well-heeled investment bankers to struggling artists. Forms of difference multiply, intersect and fold in on themselves. Schoolchildren exchange jokes in a swirling slang of hip-hop-inflected English, Somali, Jamaican patois, Arabic and cockney. In the middle of one of the UK's poorest housing estates, there's a small cul-de-sac of former stables, converted into fashionable homes which sell for over a million pounds. Streets of red-brick Victorian terraces are split between wealthy private owners and refugees living in converted flats. Dance groups and anti-austerity activists encounter one another at the offices of a charity for Latin American migrants; home-schooling families, artists and trendy young Muslims mingle at a community centre. An Anglican church hosts a post office, a café and a day-care centre, all within its grand, vaulted hall.

Our interconnected planet was not born in the current age, but in the colonial one. Surveying the Kilburn High Road, the famed geographer Doreen Massey once wrote that, 'It is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history'.[12] Though not always as readily apparent as in Kilburn, colonial histories can be traced wherever migrant communities have put down roots in Europe. Throughout the 1800s and into the early 1900s, Europe experienced a migration boom, as Europeans left their homelands to chase opportunities in colonised countries across the Americas, Africa and Asia. Many others were deported as bonded labourers. At a peak in the early twentieth century, nearly 1.4 million people left Europe each year.[13] As a share of the European population, this outpouring likely dwarfed migration in our present age, shaping the world in profound ways.[14]

Coupled with this was the slave trade. Between 1450 and

1900, 11.3 million African slaves were shipped across the Atlantic to the Americas and West Indies. Meanwhile, between 800 and 1900, a further 7.2 million slaves were shipped across the Sahara, 2.4 million across the Red Sea, and 2.9 million were sent from East Africa, bound for North Africa, the Middle East or Asia. The slave trade reached a grim peak in the 1790s, after European colonists took over older, Arab-dominated slave-trading routes. As colonial expansion and greed intensified, so too did the global demand for slaves.[15] Other forms of commerce, as well as indentured labour, played a further role in unsettling and resettling the globe – leading to Somali seamen coming to live in Victorian-era Cardiff, black entertainers serving in the court of Elizabeth I and Indian and Chinese labourers setting down roots in the Caribbean. Alongside these globe-spanning movements, colonialism also triggered migrations of a different sort, as colonial conquest devastated cities and villages, drew borders across far-off continents based on European rivalries, and created new hubs of economic activity and power – prompting large-scale migrations and mixing within colonial territories.

This upheaval created new channels of connection, linking people and cultures across the colonised world and back to Europe. Circuits of transport, communication, finance, trade, bureaucracy and governance along with missionary movements and the global exchange of goods created a highly interconnected world.

At the end of the Second World War these links and upheavals became the foundation for a new age of migration. While many displaced or struggling Europeans moved to America, those living in colonial or post-colonial nations opted to try their luck in Europe. As we saw in Kilburn, the need to rebuild nations including Britain and France led to active recruitment campaigns from current and former colonies. People from Vietnam and North Africa came to France, Indonesians moved to the Netherlands, and Indian, Pakistani and Afro-Caribbean

migrants arrived in Britain. Meanwhile, economic booms and labour shortages in the 1960s led countries like West Germany and the Netherlands to develop international recruitment programmes that brought in migrants from countries such as Turkey or Morocco.

From these starting points, migration to Europe, alongside that to North America, has grown more diverse. Since 1960, the proportion of international migrants within the world has remained roughly the same, at around 3 per cent.[16] Today, however, these migrants hail from an increasingly diverse range of countries, regions and backgrounds.[17] In some cases, former colonial countries and metropolises have become hubs, creating new mixtures of identity, as would-be migrants stop off for a few months or years while they continue to search for a better life. In other cases, migration has contributed to a slow rise in the wealth of countries of origin, as migrants send money back to relatives or return to build homes or start businesses. In turn, economic development has made the costly journey overseas accessible to a wider range of people. Finally, just as the 1960s saw European states forming links with new nations to expand access to cheap labour, so too have more recent economic shifts opened up new migratory routes – from the end of the Soviet Union to the rapid industrialisation of China, to the expansion of the EU. Collectively, these changes have not accelerated migration, but they have diversified it, widening the range of backgrounds from which migrants hail. Today, those living in places where migrants have settled are often faced with an ever-growing kaleidoscope of difference.

As movement steadily reshapes the world, places like Kilburn offer a glimpse into what is likely to become an increasingly common future. Around 2045, the number of non-white Americans is expected to overtake the number of white Americans.[18] Meanwhile, in the UK, even if significant restrictions on immigration are put in place, and kept, the non-white population is

projected to double, from 17.5 per cent to 35.6 per cent between 2016 and 2061.[19] Even when such trends may not play out nationally, they may take hold in large, globally connected cities.[20] More than this, regardless of where we live, today almost all of us routinely come into contact with difference – different cultures, viewpoints, beliefs and ways of living – through the internet, and through global commerce and media. As a consequence, the lives of citizens – whoever they are – seem to be growing further apart, or at least more distinctive. In 1984, the anthropologist Sandra Wallman published *Eight London Households*, a book where she explored how families in the 80s lived. She found that the households she studied were united by a strong sense of identity and belonging grounded in their local neighbourhood. In 2013, the German sociologist Jörg Dürrschmidt published an update to Wallman's study, which found little in the way of shared, local roots. Instead, Dürrschmidt's Londoners focused on cultivating a distinctive sense of personal identity. Drawing on the diverse offerings of the city, they crafted lives that were distinctively their own.[21]

In places like Kilburn, differences in nationality, language, income, lifestyle, profession, generation, gender, history, education, class, sexuality, social circles, ethnicity and belief all interact with one another. Yet if this swirling difference makes it challenging to spot a singular pattern, it doesn't mean that Kilburn is somehow being pulled apart by diversity. Rather, difference moves in and out of being ordinary and extraordinary, enriching and troublesome, as people build their lives.

Several months after my first visit, now living in Kilburn myself, I found myself at a garden centre one grey December afternoon, navigating plastic Christmas trees. I was with Paddy and Daisy, two old friends who had both moved to Kilburn in their twenties – Paddy from Ireland and Daisy from a small English village. Daisy was now in her mid-nineties, while Paddy was a sprightly seventy-nine. The pair met decades ago, through

a tenants' association Daisy helped found for the residents of their tower block. The outing that afternoon had been arranged by a 'friendship club' Daisy was a part of – run by a local church. The visit to the garden centre was a sort of annual ritual, where each year they perused Christmas baubles and visited Santa's grotto, before settling in at a café with some tea or mulled wine. Paddy was not a regular part of the group, but he had come along to lend a hand and catch up with his old friend. As Paddy and I took turns pushing Daisy's wheelchair, weaving gingerly between overstuffed displays of ornaments, Daisy reminisced, sharing stories from the past, as Paddy nodded along.

When Daisy started the tenants' association, her initial intention was to push for simple improvements to their building. But she soon found herself with a stream of visitors asking for help with their bills, repairs or their family disputes. People came by to ask if they were allowed to decorate their council flat, but stayed to get her opinion on wallpaper swatches. Others would arrive, struggling with English, asking for help in understanding their rental or employment contracts – only to end up in tears, talking about the struggle of making a life in an unfamiliar place. Over time, as Paddy grew more involved in the tenants' association himself, he became involved in this living-room therapy, too. The association had begun to serve as a sort of stand-in family for those with few other sources of support.

With the occasional contribution from Paddy, Daisy told me about the relationships she had built with her neighbours, and of the stories they had told her: of the Polish handyman who helped residents make speedy repairs or alterations to their flats, without the council noticing; or the Pakistani lady who bent Daisy's ear about her struggle to connect with her daughter, who was much more comfortable in London than she was. Daisy told us how when she had first come to London, she found it a lonely, frightening place. In the stories of her neighbours, she recognised herself – disoriented, uncertain, determined to

make a life. Paddy agreed. He had arrived from Ireland at a time when there was still considerable hostility towards the Irish – when they were stereotyped as lazy, criminal and unclean. For both, being able to connect with their neighbours helped make London home.

Ultimately, however, Daisy and Paddy both stepped back from the tenants' association. The requests for help were becoming overwhelming. But more than that, something was missing. Tighter rules around who was eligible for social housing meant that households moved around more often. Their neighbours started changing more rapidly. People were arriving from increasingly diverse backgrounds, and this made it harder to connect. The need for help, for sympathy and care was still there. If anything, it had grown. But the sense of community this once fostered seemed to disappear. The work shifted from an expression of care between neighbours, to providing a free and demanding service.

Up to this point, Daisy had led the conversation. But here, Paddy interjected to talk about his career as a gardener. He had worked for the Greater London Authority, and as a part of his duties he occasionally tended to the trees and flower beds that once flanked London's bustling Regent Street. Today, he lamented, most of the plants had gone. And he could see why. Towards the end of his years as a gardener, he was seeing more and more people damaging the plants he cared for, making it harder and harder to maintain them. It didn't help that many of the larger stores along Regent Street had come to be managed by wealthy foreign property investors or large multinational corporations who were collectively less willing to invest in the public spaces around them. He summed up his diagnosis decisively: the public spaces in London – just like his and Daisy's tenants' association – had declined because of 'all these immigrants!' Paddy looked at us and grumbled. 'No respect for anything any more.' In fact, he suggested, at this rate it wouldn't be long

before London had no public space left. At this Daisy frowned, and gestured towards me – the brown-skinned, Canadian-born anthropologist, with a family history that had unfolded in the shadow of the British empire across three continents. 'But *he's* an immigrant!' she protested.

'You know what I mean,' Paddy responded, half irritated, half amused. 'Not like him!'

Even for those who champion openness, living with difference can create real and weighty challenges. The efforts of refugees and migrants to establish new homes may conflict with the rights or aspirations of indigenous groups or settled minorities. Communities may disagree over the place of religious values in the school system, families may clash over different understandings of love and familial duty, and neighbours may quarrel over different understandings of gender and sexuality or stumble over language differences. These challenges often entail the tricky business of weighing up competing perspectives, values, hopes and fears, and cannot always be resolved by a simple insistence on acceptance, openness or equality.

These sorts of challenges have been connected to wider patterns which seem to suggest that diversity can pose a threat to our health, our communities and even the workings of democracy: locally, increases in ethnic diversity seem to trigger spikes in stress and declining feelings of well-being, as residents contend with changes to the fabric of their daily lives.[22] At a larger scale, growing ethnic diversity has repeatedly been shown to contribute to declining social trust and community involvement,[23] as well as to the unwillingness of citizens to act collaboratively and to invest in public goods.[24]

Declines in well-being, public trust, civic life and solidarity have likewise been linked to many other forms of difference

as well – from income inequality to the splintering of media consumption into countless, relatively detached conversations.[25] Democracy relies on citizens trusting that their perspective and interests are represented. But minority groups tend to experience *lower* trust in their fellow citizens within democratic states.[26] Meanwhile, as differences grow, and shared beliefs and understandings splinter, even relatively powerful majority groups often come to view themselves as besieged minorities.[27]

If we believe the story about difference leading to conflict, then as the world grows more diverse, these patterns seem to foretell a future full of looming threat. Such fears increasingly drive democratic politics, stretching across the political spectrum. For the better part of the last two decades, immigration has been identified as the most pressing political issue by the British public,[28] and misgivings over immigration seemed to play a decisive role in driving the 2016 Brexit vote.[29] Similar preoccupations with migration can be found across a range of democracies, from the US to Italy, Germany and South Africa.[30] Conservatives talk nostalgically about the loss of national cultures and collective morality; self-proclaimed centrists fret about the prominence of 'identity politics'; and those on the left bemoan the decline of class-based solidarity or the ongoing ways in which minorities get excluded, misrepresented and vilified by more dominant groups. 'Fake news', 'alternative facts' and political division cause anxiety for people across a range of political camps – only no one can agree on who had the 'real' facts to begin with, or on how people ought to come back together. All these fears, in their own way, trade on an understanding of difference, where conflict is imagined as a near-inevitable result of living with others. If we truly believe this, then there is little that can be done except to throw up our walls and hunker down.

Yet there are plenty of signs that this may not be the whole story. For instance, there have been dozens of studies into the effect of diversity on trust. While findings vary from study to

study, the overall pattern seems to be one where diversity does, in fact, have a negative impact on trust. Yet this overall effect is also very small – meaning that diversity cannot serve as the primary explanation for a waning sense of community spirit, or the diminished trust in democracies.[31] Meanwhile, when we look locally, we can find plenty of exceptions to this pattern, where growing diversity is in fact associated with growing trust and an upswing in civic engagement. These exceptions suggest that there is no *necessary* relationship between diversity and conflict. And, when we take a closer look at diverse communities, we can begin to find ways in which diversity can enrich life, shaping new forms of understanding and connection. Across all of this, there are hints of another story to be told – one which may seem unfamiliar, but which may emerge if we can only pause, and listen.

This is where my own field of anthropology can help. 'Anthropology' comes from the Greek *anthrōpos*, meaning 'humankind', and *logia*, meaning 'study'. In its broadest sense anthropology is simply that – the study of what it means to be human. Unsurprisingly, this is a tricky question. As soon as you begin to survey the vast variety of human societies, it becomes quickly apparent that all sorts of different people define and experience their humanity in dramatically different ways. At the heart of anthropology, then, is a commitment to taking this difference seriously. Anthropology begins with a pause – with setting aside what we think we know, in order to hold space to listen, as best as we can, to what others are telling us.

Anthropology is a broad field. Over the years, anthropologists have developed distinct specialities. Evolutionary anthropology looks at humanity across our long collective history, drawing closely on psychology and physiology to try to understand