This is the year when Europe rededicates itself to the eradication of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. I have presented these lectures in the spirit of that dedication, and with the hope that the productive controversy my words undoubtedly will have stirred will continue - will continue around dinner tables, will continue as little shifts of empathy, will occasion some degree of thought-provoking anxiety, and yet remain civil.

My assumption in these lectures has been that my audience is one of good people of all races and ages, good people of good will; and my subject has been the small aggressions of unconscious racism rather than the big-booted oppressions of bigotry in its most extreme manifestations.

I have chosen to speak of these quieter forms of racism because I think that the eradication of prejudice, the reconciling of tensions across racial, ethnic, cultural and religious lines depends upon eradicating the little blindnesses, not just the big. It depends upon eradicating the troublesome, attitudinal divide between the paralysing anxiety of well-meaning white guilt and the smouldering unhappiness of blacks who dare not speak their minds.

It is not an easy project, this. Perhaps as an outsider, it will have been easier for me to raise these issues. If so, I hope my thoughts will serve as a bridge to the more intimate contexts of the specific struggles you face in Britain.

To summarise some of the points that I think are most important. Race is not a cipher for poverty. Racism is no doubt immensely complicated by the pervasions of poverty; but, like anti-Semitism, xenophobia and gender bias, it has a separate power that transgresses socioeconomic strata. But race is not the same as poverty.

Race is not a cipher for disease. I am thinking of the globally renowned geneticist who at a luncheon I attended recently said, “Unfortunately Aids may be the answer to Africa’s social problems”. Too many people are enamoured of Malthusian explanations for racism, plague and pestilence as just convenient forms of natural selection. Race is not a cipher for disease.

Race is not a cipher for bestiality. Reject, I beseech you, all those dehumanising stereotypes of big baboons, so insulting even to baboons: small brained, aggressive, excessively sized body parts, brightly-coloured hind quarters advertising endless sexual availability, possessed of a boisterous personality and a taste for sensual delights with no moderating instinct for propriety.
Resist, I say to you, those images whose metaphor power has dehumanised black people, has dehumanised Jews before that, has dehumanised all who utter such ugliness into continued being. Race is not a cipher for the sub-human.

Race is not a cipher for exotic entertainment. All you who have endured the trample of tourists, violating your little corner of paradise in search of ancient abbeys, imagine how it is to be the monument in question, to be the flavour of the day, the plumed endangered species with the band around one’s ankle. It is a kind of deep disrespect, this failure to see the difference between my humanity, for instance, and the seductiveness of a mossy ruin.

“I am part Native American,” I told someone recently. His eyebrows went up as though I were a particularly romantic bit of architectural rubble. “Really?”, he said, with a breathy thrill in his voice and a quiver of excitement that told me he had never met one of those before. He lifted his hand up in the international signal for cigar store Indian. “How,” he said in a deep voice, and with the reverent solemnity of a duck hunter, emitting one of those calls that attracts the kind of duck whose goose will no doubt soon be cooked. Race is not a cipher for exotic entertainment.

Race is not a cipher for the whole of life. When I speak of race, you must bear in mind that this is not the same thing as saying that race explains everything. Race does not explain all forms of misfortune any more than it explains the colour of one’s socks. Yet conversations about race so quickly devolve into anxious bouts of wondering why we are not talking about something, anything else - like hard work or personal responsibility or birth order or class or God or the good old glories of the human spirit. All these are worthy topics of conversation, surely, but can we consider just for one moment race?

I am often pressed to stop considering so much and just to think up a nice set of snappy resolutions. But racism is an enormously subtle perceptual matter. Shifting its perceptions involves figuring out how to insinuate one’s way through all sorts of well guarded social hierarchies that affect black people no less than white people.

There is an oft cited story of a well dressed black man who boards a train. A white person announces with distaste, “There’s a negro on this train.” The black man leaps up in alarm and says, “Where, where?” Finding a door in is a trick of social vision as much as it is of legal remedy or political recourse. How do I startle someone into seeing racism even when it indicts oneself? How do I in effect tickle someone into seeing the links between, the sensation of lowered status when a black person sits down at the next table in the restaurant; the sensation of economic risk when a black person is advertising the product you produce; the sensation of certainty that no black person has anything at all to teach you?

If and when that seeing happens, that seeing of an unconsidered link to racism, it comes one way in the first instance, sneaks up soft as osmosis in the second, crashes through with a bright flash in the third. The understanding never seems to happen the same way twice. That’s why I offer not a single set of pronouncements, but a layered set of parables for what I hope will be sensible and sustained consideration.
There is much contemporary see-sawing between the capitulation to a sense of inevitable doom and the frenetically applied quick fix. This is a phenomenon of which I am extremely suspicious. Impatience rather than urgency guides the thinking. Pressing problems are not met with deeper thought, just quicker thought. In fact, I would go so far as to say that part of what actually aggravates social and racial divisions at the moment is precisely that deep current of doom over which babbles a stream of simplistic bromides such as just love one another, family values, and victimology. Hard to argue with, hard to analyse, and hardly a substitute for serious engagement.

I believe that racism shares a pattern with other isms: a relation to other hierarchies. It is, I think, why the lessons of the Holocaust are so important to the entire world, why the Civil Rights Movement became a model in the uprising in Tiananmen Square, why the struggle for black equality has sustained so much piggybacking with other movements.

It’s helpful to remember that for all its diffuseness, the power of race as dangerous and sensational has been perpetuated by very identifiable historical phenomena. Racism is not inevitable, however entrenched. There have been better and worse moments in the history of race relations. Race as an invested feature of modern relation is scarcely much older than the triangle trade. Understanding this as a relatively recent phenomenon reveals how many of our racial clashes are the consequence of human shipwreck rather than divine order.

It is my optimistic conclusion that the more of this history we study, the more we can map the shoals upon which are likely to become stranded, the more nuanced our responses, and the more salutary the outcome.

This sounds simpler and more obvious than perhaps it is. Surely there has not been much respect or regard for this as academic enterprise. “Political correctness,” comes the dismissive hiss. This is very much society’s loss. I think that the psychic and physical devastation that so marked slave and colonial systems echoes into our lives today a dramatic reiteration among both black and white people. If we could but see a causal chain, a procession of events linked over time, it might teach us many lessons about the long-term consequences of violently exploiting any group of humans as only capital - of exhausting them to death and then treating their bodies like interchangeable, worn out machines.

I think that a significant part of the failure to see each other is fed by a persistently divided rhetoric of race. In this regard, the organs of mass culture deserve close scrutiny for their role in perpetuating pseudoscientific, racialised ideologies of violence. For an example of such divided thought, consider those instances of criminals who are black and raise little armies. They are called gangs. They are called pathological, brutish, and incapable of comprehending social limit.

Criminals who are white and raise little armies, on the other hand, are too often seen as rugged individuals, beleaguered patriots, militiamen pursuing new frontiers. A little misguided, perhaps, but honourable. Both are surely outlaws, yet tellingly both tend to be romanticised within their various communities as outposts against the encroaching excess of big government and state force.
This employ of differentiated racial rhetoric, not just for general predictive guidance but to indict real individuals as though by real description, this has been fuelled by the very powerful forces of racial science. We must be on our guard for this new age race science - the science of stereotypification so outlandishly well funded at the moment, so skilled at flooding the ever more narrowly controlled media, so seductive to those who need easy explanations for the seemingly uncontrollable forces so rapidly shaping our world.

I have tried to introduce over the course of these lectures specific examples of how racial stereotype masquerades as scientific category. I hope these examples provide a general cautionary lesson about how popular culture in every era has mythologised racial myth into a kind of felt normativity, powerful enough to trump even the most compelling empirical data.

As a beneficiary of so many of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, I believe that the commitment to the notion of equality has been the very cornerstone of that progress. Certainly there have been many battles about how one defines equality: equality of outcome; equality of access to the basic necessities of life like food, healthcare, education and housing; equality as neutral colour-blind principle; or equality as substantive equity and fairness before the law.

But however fractious that argument has been, one of the most ominous turns in the American debate of late has been an open and growing abandon of even the ideal of egalitarianism. “We are not all equal,” comes the plaint. “Why even pretend?” Then a list of entitlements based on being “better than” and other prerogatives of power. Inherent superiority masquerading as merit is then used to attack entitlement programmes allocating resources to the disempowered.

The resistance to egalitarianism is also a product of the insecurities of this global economic moment. The values of a resolutely efficient marketplace are not always compatible with the principles of fairness. And while there is something to be said for distributive justice theories of dog eat dog and caveat emptor in the inanimate context of a sale of ball bearings, I do not wish to see that dynamic overtake our entire ethical civil and political discourse. There is nothing wrong with the idea of market economics, given its own historical context and some negotiated normative limits. But when our very self-worth becomes linked to our material possessions, when poor or socially undesired people become discardable because they are deemed “useless”, we must retain our sense of alarm about such a state. Our definition of human utility must be broader and more generous. In these times of broad polemic, we must revivify the struggle, the love and the logic that gave birth to the ideas and the implementation of egalitarianism to begin with.

I would like to return to what I think is one of the greatest obstacles to progress at this moment: the paralysing claim that racism has no solution. Resembling often the schoolyard game of bullies tormenting those deemed “wimps”, this argument takes a number of forms. Racism has no solution because racism is universal. All cultures are racist and xenophobic. Circling the wagons around one’s own is just a human thing. Or racism has no solution because even if it is a problem, it’s a social problem, and law, politics and economic regulation have no place in the social realm. People will
just have to deal with it by themselves. Let them inter-marry. Not quite let them eat cake, but rather a romantic resolution to palpable political disparity. Or racism has no solution because while white people used to hate black people, now it’s black people who hate white people; so it’s only fair for white people to hate black people in return. And so the argument sloshes back and forth, forth and back, like a pendulum, like a lullaby, like the tolling of a bell. Or racism has no solution because it’s not our problem. Black people ought to help themselves before they lay claim to the sympathies of good white people.

I must say I always wonder at this sifting out of the presumed responsibility of black people for their own fate that so casually overlooks the long history of self-help and intra-community networks that do exist. It is true that such self-help structures - churches, for example - are neither wealthy, nor philanthropic in a way that matches those of some other groups. But much political rhetoric treats them as non-existent; and while no-one can argue that black self-help is not a fine thing, I worry about its meaning when it is used as an injunction that black concerns be severed from the question of how we as a society operate. These debates make me suspicious when they are raised so as to really imply that black people are overreaching, even as black people earn only two thirds of similarly educated and qualified white people.

I am suspicious when arguments for black self-help are posited alongside characterisations of anti-discrimination remedies as only having helped those who were already over privileged to begin with. They feed images of those who speak publicly of racial discrimination as those who are merely exploiting white guilt for personal profit.

With regard to all these configurations, let me just say that I am certain that the solution to racism lies in our ability to see its ubiquity but not concede its inevitability. It lies in the collective and institutional power to make change, at least as much as with the individual will to change. It also lies in the absolute moral imperative to break the childish, deadly circularity of centuries of blindness to the shimmering brilliance of our common, ordinary humanity.

I do believe wholeheartedly that there are lessons to be gleaned from the practised commitment to the community of all people. What is it that enables a discourse of hospitality when we step across the bounds to be part of a world other than our own? How unrestrained or imperial is the claim of what we call ours in the world?

When I come to London, albeit on Michael Jackson’s coat-tails, when you come to the churches of Harlem, how gracefully do we negotiate the accommodation of each other’s presence even as the lurking threat of such accommodation is loss; our sacrifice in knowing that inclusion of new faces might change the landscape forever?

On one hand, how can we make each other welcome in a world in which fear so rules the day? On the other hand, how can we present ourselves responsibly so as not to wear thin the welcome mat in a world that is increasingly, urgently and perhaps irreversibly diasporic? On one hand, how do we maintain the rituals, the mother tongues, the intimacies that reinforce the boundaries of what keeps us sane? On the other hand, how do we remain open to the possibility that my son may want to marry
your daughter? Although I must say in my own case the greater test would come if my son were to become affianced to the aforesaid Jackson offspring.

Perhaps part of this is, in the words of an old Cherokee proverb, as simple as trying to walk a mile in another’s moccasins: just the momentary, imaginary exercise of taking to mind and heart the investment of oneself in another; indeed the investment of oneself as that other.

This simplicity is in tension with the hard part, of course - the task of summoning up the generosity it takes to scrunch down a few inches in the family pew in order to make room for the funny looking newcomer. And even that task is mere metaphor for the really hard part - that of facing the possibility of the elimination of one’s community as distinct and of one’s heralded bloodline as a pure inheritance.

In the United States, there is a battle glibly called the “culture wars” in which fierce some conjuring of motley and mongrel immigrant values threaten to engulf the seamlessness of American cultural unity, in turn vaunted as a tradition of unalloyed Englishness. Of course the degree to which the United States has long been one chunky, simmering stew of alloy is perhaps most apparent to those of us who are most proud of our distinctly flavourful contributions to the American broth. But, as in the context of miscegenation, the extent to which an always pre-existing alloy is celebrated as pure, in any given historical moment, is the degree to which we suppress the history of a kind of primal human struggle - a struggle between the embracing familiarity of the narrow, well-worn path as opposed to the heady vastness, the liberating lure of human universalism.

I was moved to much meditation upon the enormous power imbalances embedded in the vocabulary with which we ritualistically delineate community: the differences between black and white, between gang and militia, between what is deemed in our own interest and what foreign, between what we figure as legitimate and what we cast out as illegitimate, between what we see and what we know, between what we say and what we do.

There are sudden moments in my life when I realise that I exist within the shadow of a public preconception; the little jolt of realising that what you symbolise is pathological dispossession and the ultimate in strangeness. We are those who can be uprooted and put down anywhere; we can be experimented with and replanted and cut down, and still we will spring back like weeds in the Garden of Eden. With a shock, I see that I am seen a bit like Gulliver, stomping my way among the Lilliputians. The earth trembles beneath my feet and there is a grinding, snapping, crunching of tiny dwellings as I walk. Little people - good little Lilliputians are fleeing for their lives. But living as a preconception is a variable condition, and seconds later I come to find myself in the land of the gargantuans, dodging the soles of big-footed giants - my voice an insignificant squeak, unheard no matter how I shout. Oh, am I shouting? With a shock, I find I am huge again. I have shifted once more, travelled through he looking glass like Alice in Wonderland, like Mighty Mouse. The contours of my body inflate and shrink, wither and bloat according to the vagaries of public mood. Oh you can’t hear me? There, how’s that? I am trying so hard to be normal. Am I fiction? Am I real? Is there a she? Is there a me apart from this bad dream?
This distance between the self and the drama of one’s stereotype, the distance between the nice internal spirit that is no-one but oneself and this wild image of the projected fear - negotiating that distance is an ethical project of creating a liveable space between the poles of other people’s imagination in the nice, calm centre of oneself where dignity resides.

Creating that space is the work of what I think of as the question at the centre of our resolution of racism, of xenophobia, and of anti-Semitism and a host of other isms. This is the question that ultimately informs the spirit that makes us all human - the spirit that worries for our dignity, this spirit that animates us as community.

I dream of a house, a dream house, my great-grandmother’s house, the home on the corner of a hot street in a small town suspended in time. My grandmother’s plates, her cherry music stand, my mother’s silver spoons, her books. Each room is filled with dreams and memories, the continuity I feel through them, the sense of precariousness in knowing that this simple thread is all there ever is. Home, each place I have lived like a skin, like a protection, like a shelter not against the weather but against the gaze of the world, an eyrie from which to contemplate what has happened in a day.

There can be no freedom for any of us, I suppose, un-tempered by the incumbency to hold oneself both open and yet back a bit; to hold oneself in the posture of one regarding something larger than oneself - an attitude of restraint, a habit of awe. And within that freedom, we may yet find miracles - miracles I think a metaphor for the insight that comes with the lack of prejudice, the abandon of prejugdement, the willingness to see another viewpoint and be converted, if only for a moment, to allow oneself to be held in a state of suspended knowing.

Culturally blackness has signified the realm of the always known as well as the not worth knowing - a space of the entirely judged. This prejudice is a practice of the non-religious. It is profane, the ultimate profanity of presuming to know it all. Racism is a gaze that insists upon the power to make others conform, to perform endlessly in the prison of prior expectation, circling repetitively back upon the expired utility of the entirely known.

Our rescue, our deliverance perhaps, lies in the possibility of listening across that great divide; of being surprised by the unknown, by the unknowable - old habits of being given way, let us hope, to a gentler genealogy of grace.