



BIOGRAPHIES

While he achieved a remarkable number of positive accomplishments throughout his lifetime, one of the events often mentioned is when Benjamin rejected the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2003. His feelings are perfectly articulated in a recent viral clip: “I’ve been fighting against empire all my life; I’ve been fighting against slavery and colonialism all my life. I’ve been writing to connect with people, not to impress government or monarchy. So how could I then accept an honour that puts empire onto my name?”. The justified and principled rejection garnered many columns of moral outrage in the press. Benjamin would later joke about how often interviews would question him about it. They would ask him about something he didn’t do; he would compare it with orange juice; he doesn’t drink orange juice but keeps being asked about why he doesn’t drink orange juice. Rather than keep asking him about something he didn’t do, he would much rather talk about the things he does do.

I was incredibly lucky to get an insight into Benjamin’s real life; he was a fascinating and inspiring person, and I’ve probably only captured a small snapshot of who he truly was. One thing I know for certain is that although he was most known as a poet and writer, he didn’t just ‘talk the talk’; when it came to what he believed in and the causes he was passionate about, he really did ‘walk the walk’. He didn’t just champion radical causes and direct action; he took part in them. He was known for his veganism and animal rights, but he also put his money where his mouth was. He participated in animal liberation action, joking with me about the difficulty of hiding dreadlocks under a hood. He was known for his anti-racism work but less known for taking part in direct-action militant antifascism, where his martial arts skills were put to good use. I was lucky enough to have heard some of his exciting tales, fond memories I will hold in my heart now that he has passed.

Benjamin Zephaniah called himself an anarchist; his principled and proactive life embodies the spirit of mutual aid and solidarity. He was a man of the people and believed in the power of the people; he came to anarchism not through an academic or historical perspective but through a common sense and fair vision of how an equal world should be. I will leave the final words of his philosophy on life with the master of language himself: “Fuck power – and let’s just take care of each other. Most people know that politics is failing. The problem is they can’t imagine an alternative. They lack confidence. I simply blanked out all the advertising, turned off the ‘tell-lie-vision’, and started thinking for myself. Then I really started to meet people – and trust me, there is nothing as great as meeting people who are getting on with their lives. Running farms, schools, shops and even economies in communities where no one has power. That’s why I’m an anarchist.”

