

Current Biography® Yearbook 2019

Diane Abbott

Date of birth: September 27, 1953

Occupation: British politician

In 2017 Diane Abbott celebrated thirty years of service as a member of Parliament (MP) in Great Britain's Labour Party, which historically has been associated with the working class. She was among the first class of Black and Asian Britons to be elected MPs. As Abbott told *Ebony* (Mar. 1988), "We [second-generation Black Britons] have this compelling need to be involved in the political process and to challenge the racism that riddles English society." She would go on to do just that over the course of her lengthy political career.

Two decades later, in 2008, Abbott received the *Spectator* magazine's Parliamentarian of the Year Awarded for Speech of Year and the Law Society's Special Judge Award for opposing detaining terror suspects for forty-two days without trial.

Despite those accolades, Abbott remains a somewhat controversial figure, sometimes at odds with her own party and often spotlighting the ongoing problems of racism and sexism in British politics. She has also sought to empower ethnic minority Britons through philanthropic ventures as well as policy.

EARLY LIFE

Diane Julie Abbott was born in London, England, on September 27, 1953. During the early 1950s her parents each emigrated from the same village in Jamaica to England, where they met. Her father was a welder, her mother, a nurse; both had left formal schooling at age fourteen. Abbott has a younger brother. Their parents later divorced; her mother moved to Yorkshire when Abbott was an adolescent, leaving her with household chores in addition to her schoolwork.

In the early 1950s there were no rules to prevent discrimination in housing. Abbott told Stephen Bush for the *New Statesman America* (17 Jan. 2017), "My father was very aspirational, and so every weekend, he and my mother would drive round houses in Pinner, and every Monday they'd ring the estate agent, and the estate agent would say the house had gone. But, of course,



Photo by Chris McAndrew via Wikimedia Commons

the house wasn't gone." The Abbotts lived first in Notting Hill and later moved to Edgware.

EDUCATION

Abbott attended Harrow County Grammar School, where she was the only black girl in her class. She was active in theater and read avidly. She recalled to Bush, "I was an omnivorous reader, and in all these books, particularly these novels between the wars, if you went to university, you went to Oxford or Cambridge." During a visit to Cambridge University during her eleventh year, Abbott was taken with the architecture of the colleges.

Abbott's teachers discouraged her, despite her top grades, but she nevertheless gained admission there and attended Newnham College, Cambridge. She earned a master's degree in history in 1973. However, she felt like an outsider during her three years at Cambridge, both socially and economically. At the same time, she developed the sense that any obstacles in life existed to be overcome, an attitude that fueled her later political career.

CIVIL SERVICE AND MEDIA

Abbott began work as an administrative trainee in the UK's Home Office. About a year and a half later the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) hired her as a race relations officer.

From 1980 until 1985, Abbott worked as a researcher for Thames Television and as a reporter for TV-am. She continued working as a press officer for local councils. Abbott also became a fixture on a BBC One political television show, *This Week*, with the Conservative pundit and politician Michael Portillo, with whom she had acted during high school. Abbott told Mary Riddell for the *Telegraph* (16 June 2010), "I don't watch the show, but so many people have told me that there's this on-screen chemistry that I'm bound to believe them. . . . We don't really socialise outside the show. My closest friends are women with similar backgrounds, and he has lots of grand Tory friends."

EARLY POLITICAL CAREER

In 1971, while at school, Abbott joined the Labour Party, which was founded in the early twentieth century and has been dedicated to better working conditions and wages. In 1982 she became a member of the Westminster City Council, one of Greater London's local governments. About a year later she ran unsuccessfully for Parliament. Then, in June 1987 she became the first black woman member of Parliament (MP), representing Hackney North and Stoke Newington, one of the poorest areas of London. Following her election, she visited the United States, meeting with black leaders such as Chicago mayor Harold Washington.

Much was made of her race at the time, but Abbott rejected the notion that she is somehow different from other blacks. She told *Ebony*, "I don't accept that I'm different from thousands of other Black people. There is enormous talent, energy and potential amongst Black people and it's about time society recognize that."

THATCHER CRITIC

Five years later Abbott was reelected, continuing to work for immigrants in her district from Greece, Turkey, and the Caribbean, as well as Hasidic Jews. Abbott was active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. She later served on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.

Abbott did not hesitate to criticize Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher's policies, particularly against immigrants, which Abbott felt were unfair to racial minorities. She also opposed a poll tax, designed to replace a property tax, because it placed an outsized burden on the poor. Abbott also spoke for the religious rights of Hasidic Jews. As she wrote in *The House*, a publication of Parliament (3 May 2019), "Margaret Thatcher is mostly remembered for the poll tax,

the miners' strike and the Falklands War. Her transformative effect on the British economy deserves to be equally well remembered. Remembered but not admired."

In 2000 she also began serving in the Mayor of London's Cabinet as the representative for equality and women's issues.

ALLIANCES AND PORTFOLIOS

Abbott became a close political ally of Jeremy Corbyn, a Labour Party leader. As she told Bush, "The thing that can be infuriating about Jeremy is that he likes to think the best of everyone. I'm always perfectly straight with him as to what I think, and even if he doesn't believe me at the time, he always does come round to my point of view."

In the early 2000s Abbott opposed centrist New Labour politicians like Tony Blair within the party ranks. Then, in 2010, she ran for leadership of the Labour Party, much to the amazement and dismay of some in the party. Abbott was criticized for attempting to become the face of Labour but maintained that the party leadership roster should include people other than white men in order to better reflect the country. She told Riddell, "I'm not thick-skinned at all, and of course I'm hurt by people attacking me as a person. On the Tube [subway], people shake my hand and say well done, but there's a very, very sour strand of thinking in Westminster, where insiders think it's outrageous I should run. But criticism goes with the territory."

Despite losing the leadership vote to Ed Miliband, Abbott became the shadow public health minister in October 2010. (In Great Britain, the official opposition party creates shadow cabinet positions that mirror those of the ruling party and challenge their counterparts on issues related to their specific portfolios.)

In May 2015 Labour candidates took only 30 percent of the vote, but Abbott kept her seat. That September she ran unsuccessfully for London mayoral candidate but became the party's shadow secretary of state for international development, a position she held for nearly a year. She then became shadow secretary of state for health in June 2016. That October Corbyn elevated her to shadow home secretary. In that role she has worked on police reform, anti-racism, and pro-immigration policies. Abbott temporarily stepped back from the role in 2017 because of difficulties with her diabetes, which was affecting her campaign performance.

After three decades of service, Abbott has remained highly popular. Known as a left-leaning politician, over the years Abbott has opposed the renewing of the Trident nuclear submarine system, tuition fees that keep many young people from top-tier schools, the war in Iraq, the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia that were used against Yemen, and construction of a third runway at

London Heathrow Airport. She has also supported abortion rights.

Abbott won reelection in June 2017 by a landslide, with 75 percent of the vote.

CONFLICTS

In a 2013 speech to the think tank Demos, Abbott charged that the economic anxiety among British men was leading to a toxic hypermasculine culture. As Harvey Morris quoted in the *New York Times*'s blog *Rendezvous* (16 May 2013), Abbott said: "At its worst, it's a celebration of heartlessness; a lack of respect for women's autonomy; and the normalization of homophobia. I fear it's often crude individualism dressed up as modern manhood."

Reprisals were swift and vicious, although she urged people to read the entire speech rather than take remarks out of context. In fact, Dawn Butler cited Abbott's experience on the Labour Party's website (21 Nov. 2018) in an article about the status of female and minority MPs on the hundredth anniversary of women gaining the right to run for parliamentary office, saying: "My colleague Diane Abbott has been particularly affected by online abuse, receiving almost half of all the abusive tweets sent to female MPs in the run-up to the [2017] general election. We've been clear that when we are in Government this must end, and Labour will make the online intimidation of MPs a criminal offence." Abbott has also spoken out about the sexist and racist vitriol she has received online as a black female MP.

PHILANTHROPY

In addition to her policy work, Abbott has created nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping Black Britons. In 1993 she began Black Women Mean Business (BWMB) to support and promote black women in business. The organization grew out of conversations with her constituents and treasury select committee meetings during her first term in Parliament. From 1994 to 2002 BWMB hosted national conventions and seminars at which women received training, networked, and attended sessions for their professional development. It also shares research and produces reports and magazine issues relevant to Black women in business.

Abbott also founded the London Schools and the Black Child (LSBC) initiative in 1999 to raise achievement levels for Black British children. Its locus of attention was first Hackney North, later expanding to encompass all of London. Although LSBC targeted London specifically, the foundation's efforts reached throughout the country via semiannual conferences. Beginning in 2005, an annual LSBC awards ceremony at the House of Commons celebrated high-achieving students of African and African Caribbean origin. LSBC also works against the

reality that more white students from privileged backgrounds are accepted into top universities than are their black and Asian counterparts.

Both groups have been subsumed into the Diane Abbott Foundation, a charity devoted to research on racial disparities. Its aim is to narrow the gaps in achievement and representation between whites and persons of color.

PERSONAL LIFE

Abbott reportedly had a brief romantic liaison with Corbyn in 1979 when Corbyn was separated from his first wife. Abbott was later married to an architect from Ghana from 1991 until 1993. Their son, James Thompson (b. 1992), attended a secondary school in Ghana and then Cambridge.

One of Abbott's most politically controversial actions involved James. Frustrated with the quality of state schools, Abbott chose to send him to an independent school when he was ten, fully prepared to lose her seat as a result. Although that did not occur, she had to fend off charges of hypocrisy because of her past criticism of such actions by other politicians. She has cited the disadvantages of his inner-city peers and worries that he would be initiated into gang life as reasons for her choice. She has also suggested it was a culturally motivated decision for which other West Indian mothers applaud her.

As an adult, Abbott took piano lessons, an experience filmed for the BBC One program *Play It Again*. In addition, she enjoys watching television and visits family in Jamaica regularly.

SUGGESTED READING

Abbott, Diane. "Diane Abbott: 'You Can't Let Racism Hold You Back.'" Interview by Huma Qureshi. *The Guardian*, 20 Sept. 2012, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/sep/20/diane-abbott-racism-interview. Accessed 12 Aug. 2019.

Abbott, Diane. "Labour's Family Roots." *New Statesman*, 20 Sept. 2010, www.newstatesman.com/society/2010/09/labour-family-community. Accessed 12 Aug. 2019.

Bush, Stephen. "Having the Last Laugh." *New Statesman America*, 17 Jan. 2017, www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/01/having-last-laugh. Accessed 11 July 2019.

"Pioneers of Britain's Parliament." *Ebony*, Mar. 1988, pp. 76–84. *Google Books*, books.google.com/books?id=nMwDAAAAMBAJ&lpq=PA76. Accessed 11 July 2019.

Riddell, Mary. "Diane Abbott: It's Very Lonely Being a Single Mother." *The Telegraph*, 16 June 2010, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/labour/7833158/Diane-Abbott-Its-very-lonely-being-a-single-mother.html. Accessed 29 July 2019.

Swift, Adam. "A Short Guide to Hypocrisy." *New Statesman America*, 3 Nov. 2003, www.new-statesman.com/node/158620. Accessed 11 July 2019.

—*Judy Johnson*

Zaradasht Ahmed

Date of birth: 1968

Occupation: Director

Filmmaker Zaradasht Ahmed had already spent years observing families in his native Iraq when, in 2010, he met Nori Sharif, a nurse working in the central Iraq town of Jalawla. Sharif was among a group of local medics that Ahmed trained to document life in conflicted areas of Iraq. Ahmed, a Kurdish Iraqi exile who has lived in Norway in the early 1990s, originally intended to use their footage for a documentary about the war in Iraq. However, after US troops unexpectedly withdrew from the country in 2011, he decided to shift his focus to a character-based film about Sharif, who, at his direction, proceeded to record post-occupation life in and around Jalawla, widely considered one of the most dangerous areas in the world.

The result was *Nowhere to Hide* (2016), a blistering, feature-length documentary that brought Ahmed a new level of international attention and critical acclaim. Largely comprised of raw footage shot by Sharif across five years of ever-worsening conditions in Iraq, the film was unanimously praised for its immersive and affecting look at the devastating effects of war, and it received several prestigious awards at international film festivals. Like Ahmed's other documentaries, which include *The Road to Diyarbekir* (2010) and *Fata Morgana* (2013), *Nowhere to Hide* highlights the theme of survival and perseverance, as Sharif, his family, and other Iraqi citizens maintain hope in the face of unspeakable horrors. In a self-penned account of the making of the film for *Al Jazeera* (14 Mar. 2018), Ahmed commented, "My ambition is to let the audience reflect on the human consequences of a brutal reality where all taboos are violated."

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Of Kurdish descent, Ahmed was born in 1968 in Sulaymaniyah, a city in northern Iraq located roughly three hours north of Jalawla. Although little has been reported on Ahmed's upbringing and family life, it is known that the filmmaker grew up amidst widespread violence and conflict. This instability was largely triggered by dictator Saddam Hussein, who, over the course of his twenty-three-year reign as Iraqi president

from 1979 to 2003, led various purges of political opponents and Iraqi ethnic groups, particularly Kurds. In an interview with Peter O'Dowd for the National Public Radio (NPR) program *Here & Now* (27 Aug. 2018), Ahmed described being part of Iraq's "war generation," a reference to the Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf War, which dominated events in that country during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Upon finishing his formal education in Iraq in 1991, Ahmed, who had an early predilection for art, was conscripted into the national army. Rather than serve in the armed forces, however, he opted to flee to Europe. Though that decision carried grave consequences, namely the possibility of execution, Ahmed explained to Amelia Smith for the *Middle East Monitor* (10 Mar. 2017), "I didn't understand who to fight for so I defected; I left the army and I could not stay." He eventually settled in Norway and gained Norwegian citizenship.

In Norway, Ahmed studied visual art at the Rogaland School of Art, from which he graduated in 1997. He later earned a bachelor's degree in television and multimedia production from the University of Stavanger, graduating in 2006. Ahmed told O'Dowd that despite his exile status, he continued to hold a deep emotional connection to events in his home country. This undeniably shaped his worldview as a filmmaker.

ARTIST TO FILMMAKER

Ahmed's path to becoming a documentary filmmaker was influenced by two major world events: the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. While Ahmed was living in Norway, he wanted to be identified simply as an artist and painter, and perhaps an Iraqi and a Kurd. However, after the September 11 attacks, people began defining him only by his Muslim faith, which introduced him to "a very ugly side [of Europeans] that I didn't see before," as he told Smith. The resultant 2003 invasion of Iraq was similarly pivotal. "It affected everything in my life and the way I am, my identity," he said to Smith.

At the time of the invasion, Ahmed was working as a visual artist, but he soon turned his attention to filmmaking, which would enable him to express himself on a wider scale. He got his start working as a freelance photographer and editor for Scandinavian television before graduating to the director's chair. Among Ahmed's first directorial efforts to receive attention was the film *The Road to Diyarbekir*. An award-winning, hour-long documentary about the legendary Kurdish singer Ciwan Haco, it first aired in Europe in 2010. In that film, Ahmed focuses on Haco's life as an exile in Gäyle, a small village in Sweden, and his decades-long efforts to return to Kurdistan after being blacklisted by the Turkish government. Those efforts crystallize

when Haco is invited to perform a concert in Diyarbekir, the largest Kurdish city in Turkey, where he is greeted enthusiastically by over one million people.

Ahmed's next feature-length documentary, *Fata Morgana* (2013), similarly examined the themes of exile and identity. Screened to acclaim at festivals all over Norway, the film follows the travails of two young Moroccan vagrants, Mounir and Feisal, who attempt to flee their homeland in search of a better life in Europe. Ahmed first met Mounir and Feisal during a trip to Morocco in 2007; he tracked the men over a period of six years, during which the two took enormous risks to reach Spain from the Moroccan port city of Tangier. "I like long-term documentaries," he said to Dimitra Kouzi for *Kouzi Productions* (24 Nov. 2016). "I like to spend years on my films, on my subjects, on my characters because I believe that film is storytelling. It is also about some unique moments that we call the moments of truth."

ORIGINS OF NOWHERE TO HIDE

Ahmed adopted the same long-term approach for his documentary *Nowhere to Hide*, which he first began working on in 2008. He initially resolved to make a film about the ongoing military conflict in Afghanistan, one that aimed to capture the new, seemingly borderless war that had emerged there. He soon moved the concept to Iraq, however, after becoming intrigued and equally disheartened by the continued escalation of sectarian violence that had spread throughout that country since the US-led invasion in 2003.

As part of efforts to capture this "uncertain reality," as he put it to Smith, Ahmed recruited local medics and journalists to document activities in highly dangerous areas around central and northern Iraq that were inaccessible to the media, otherwise known as "no-go-zones." Over the course of a year, he taught them how to operate film cameras and how to conduct interviews. Among a group of twelve medics that Ahmed trained was Nori Sharif, a nurse. Sharif was then working at a hospital in Jalawla, in Iraq's Diyala province, an area that had come to be known as the "triangle of death" for its large number of insurgent attacks.

Despite having no prior knowledge about filmmaking, Sharif quickly distinguished himself as one of the most committed members of the group. Once the United States withdrew its troops from Iraq in December 2011 and the country transitioned to self-rule, Ahmed decided to focus his project exclusively on Sharif. This shift to a more personal character-based film offered Ahmed the opportunity to humanize the conflict in Iraq, which continued to worsen after the end of the US occupation. Ahmed, mostly directed Sharif from a distance (at a secure

base set up in Sulaymaniyah), helping to give the footage a personal feel. As the filmmaker explained to Karzan Sulaivany for *Kurdistan 24* (28 Aug. 2018), "The film was meant to be emotional without borders, to make people attached to those who are involved in the film emotionally and not in a factual or news-based medium."

A DIFFERENT LOOK AT WAR

Filmed over a period of five years and assembled from approximately 300 to 400 hours of footage, *Nowhere to Hide* chronicles Sharif and his family's day-to-day struggles to survive in war-torn Iraq. This theme of desperate survival is established in the film's brief prologue, which opens with the image of a solitary, sweat-soaked, and white tunic-garbed Sharif stumbling through a bleak desert landscape. Sharif's family has been displaced from their home, and he is frantically searching for water for his children, who are sick.

After this opening sequence, the film flashes back three years to December 2011, when Ahmed first enlists Sharif to record and interview people in his community in the immediate aftermath of US occupation. Though initially optimistic about their future, the locals are soon filled with dread and terror as sectarian violence escalates. Sharif, meanwhile, is thrust from observer to subject as he finds himself amid near-daily attacks and suicide bombings. Sharif and his family remain in Jalawla until the city is seized by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group in late 2014, at which point they become nomadic refugees. The family then shuttles between various locations before finding safety at a refugee camp for displaced persons in Iraq's Baqubah province, which brings the film to its hopeful conclusion.

Featuring a spare guitar-based soundtrack by Norwegian composer Gaute Barlinthaug and singer Ciwan Haco, *Nowhere to Hide* earned widespread acclaim upon its debut in 2016. The many honors the film received included the coveted best feature-length documentary prize at that year's International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, the world's largest documentary film festival. It also took home the Amanda Award for best documentary at the 2017 Norwegian International Film Festival.

Nowhere to Hide was screened at film festivals all over the world, bringing Ahmed recognition as one of the first directors to shed light on what civilian life was like in post-occupation Iraq. Many critics praised Ahmed for his shrewd hands-off approach in making the film, allowing Sharif's raw, unfiltered footage to give viewers a rare glimpse into the experiences of innocent civilians forced to endure the horrors of war. Jeanette Catsoulis, in a review for the *New York*

Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Times (22 June 2017), wrote that the film “has a raw immediacy that’s both appropriate and involving,” and that despite its “rough” look, “the emotions [are] always hovering near the surface.” In another review, for the *Washington Post* (6 July 2017), Ann Hornaday commented, “The great gift of Ahmed’s film, and the way he has collaborated creatively with his subject, is that viewers can no longer read about faraway events in central Iraq as distant or abstract.”

In 2018, *Nowhere to Hide* made its US broadcast premiere on the *POV* (initialism for Point of View) series on the Public Broadcast Service (PBS). Ahmed noted that he hoped his film would give people a different perspective on the Iraq war that will ultimately help to inspire change. “We are all human, we all feel the same things, we have to share and not close the door,” he explained to Smith. “We have to lift the other people up. Help them, make the world a better place to live in.”

SUGGESTED READING

Ahmed, Zaradasht. “Interview with Zaradasht Ahmed, Dir. *Nowhere to Hide*.” By Dimitra Kouzi. *Kouzi Productions*, 24 Nov. 2016, kouziproductions.com/blog/2016/11/24/interview-with-zaradasht-ahmed-dir-nowhere-to-hide/. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

———. “*Nowhere to Hide*: Iraq Emergency Room—Filmmaker’s View.” *Al Jazeera*, 14 Mar. 2018, www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2018/03/hide-iraq-emergency-room-180312071311633.html. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

———. “‘*Nowhere to Hide*’ Documents Family’s Survival through 5 Years of Violence in Iraq.” Interview by Peter O’Dowd. *Here & Now*, WAMU 88.5 American University Radio, NPR, 27 Aug. 2018, wamu.org/story/18/08/27/nowhere-to-hide-documents-familys-survival-through-5-years-of-violence-in-iraq/. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

Catsoulis, Jeanette. “Review: ‘*Nowhere to Hide*’ for an Iraqi Nurse Still Clinging to Hope.” Review of *Nowhere to Hide*, by Zaradasht Ahmed. *The New York Times*, 22 June 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/movies/nowhere-to-hide-review.html. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

Hornaday, Ann. “*Nowhere to Hide* Gives a Gift: Making Iraq under the Islamic State No Longer a Faraway Crisis.” Review of *Nowhere to Hide*, by Zaradasht Ahmed. *The Washington Post*, 6 July 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/nowhere-to-hide-gives-a-gift-making-iraq-under-the-islamic-state-no-longer-a-faraway-crisis/2017/07/06/c9ea2714-5db0-11e7-9b7d-14576dc0f39d_story.html. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

Smith, Amelia. “Tony Blair and George Bush Opened the Gate of Hell in Iraq.” *Middle East Monitor*, 10 Mar. 2017, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170310-tony-blair-and-george-bush-opened-the-gate-of-hell-in-iraq/. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

Sulaivany, Karzan. “*Nowhere to Hide*: Kurdish Filmmaker’s Award-Winning Documentary Explores Human Suffering in War.” *Kurdistan 24*, 28 Aug. 2018, www.kurdistan24.net/en/culture/61b39f48-ce2d-4df6-be15-ae-6351a3c960. Accessed 15 Oct. 2018.

SELECTED WORKS

The Road to Diyarbekir, 2010; *Fata Morgana*, 2013; *Nowhere to Hide*, 2016

—Chris Cullen

Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Date of birth: 1983

Occupation: Artist

Njideka Akunyili Crosby is an award-winning visual artist. Her mixed-media paintings combine paint, photography, and found materials, such as marble dust and fabric. Her work, “based on my autobiography,” she told Jean-Philippe Dedieu for the *New Yorker* (5 Nov. 2015), combines references to her Nigerian upbringing and her adulthood in the United States in intimate domestic scenes. “I feel like my journey has created a character or person who doesn’t fit in any box,” she told Dedieu. Drawn from family photographs, magazine clippings, and staged photos with her husband, sculptor Justin Crosby, Akunyili Crosby’s work often has a silk-screen effect that mimics the haze of dreams or memories. Her figurative style recalled for Dedieu a quote from the novel *Open City* (2011) by the Nigerian American author Teju Cole. “Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity,” Cole wrote. “These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations.”

Akunyili Crosby has received a slew of awards for her work, including a MacArthur “genius” grant in 2017. Akunyili was stunned when she received the call; she had always dreamed of winning the grant in her fifties or sixties. She told Deborah Vankin for the *Los Angeles Times* (2 Nov. 2017) that she planned to spend some of her \$625,000 prize on an extended trip to Nigeria. Other accolades include the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s 2014 James Dicke Contemporary Artist Prize, the Studio Museum



Photo by Donato Sardella/Getty Images for Hammer Museum

of Harlem's 2015 Joyce Alexander Wein Prize, the 2015 New Museum's Next Generation Prize, and the 2016 Prix Canson for works on paper. She also appeared on *Foreign Policy's* 2015 Leading Global Thinkers list.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Akunyili Crosby was born in Enugu, a former coal-mining town in Nigeria, in 1983. Her father, J. C. Akunyili, was a physician. Her mother, Dora Akunyili, began her career as a pharmacology professor. In 2001, Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo appointed her director-general of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). At the time, Nigeria was vexed by a flood of deadly fake medicine. (Akunyili Crosby's maternal aunt, who had diabetes, was killed after receiving fake insulin.) Under Dora Akunyili's leadership, the fake drug market declined by 90 percent. She went on to become minister of information and communications. Though she died of cancer in 2014, Dora Akunyili remains a national hero.

Akunyili Crosby is the fourth of six children. Three of her siblings went on to become doctors, like their parents. As a child, Akunyili Crosby showed a natural affinity for the sciences and enjoyed poring over her father's book of diseases. After skipping a grade, she was accepted to boarding school at the prestigious Queens College in Lagos, the country's bustling capital, at the age of ten. It was a bit of culture shock for Akunyili Crosby, who was more familiar with life in grandmother's village, where she spent weekends and summers. The village was lit by kerosene lamps "so everybody goes to bed when the sun sets at seven, and there is *nothing*

to do. Get up at 5:30 and sweep the floor with palm fronds," she recalled to Sophie Heawood for the *Guardian* (3 Oct. 2016). Boarding school, she said, "was my first contact with a cosmopolitan life."

EARLY ART CAREER

When Akunyili Crosby was a teenager, her mother won a US green-card lottery for the family. In 1999, at the age of sixteen, Akunyili Crosby moved to Philadelphia with her sister. The girls spent a year taking classes at a community college and studying for the SATs. In addition to her rigorous course load of science classes, Akunyili Crosby decided to take a painting class, her first, for fun. Her teacher encouraged her to pursue painting, and she did, studying both fine art and biology at Swarthmore College, outside of Philadelphia.

She graduated in 2004 and returned to Lagos, where her family was then living. She broke difficult news to her parents: she wanted to pursue art, and she was seriously dating Crosby, a white American man. "That's why I feel like my art and Justin are so linked," she told Diane Solway for *W Magazine* (15 Aug. 2017). "Because it was all or nothing. You rebel or you don't." Her mother took the news in stride, but her father took longer to come around. One of her paintings, *I Still Face You* (2015), depicts a scene based on Crosby's first meeting with the family. In it, her father stands with his arms crossed. The tension in the room is palpable. Akunyili Crosby's trip home that year was emotionally fraught for other reasons, as well. Around Christmas, while the family was traveling to a reunion, her mother narrowly survived an assassination attempt.

GRADUATE WORK

Akunyili Crosby earned a post-baccalaureate certificate at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 2006. She went on to study at Yale University, where she became inspired by the paintings of legendary artist Kerry James Marshall. A 2009 portrait of a black woman particularly impressed her. "I don't think any work has had an effect on me like that," she recalled to Solway. "He was putting images in a space where you don't expect to see them. And I'm thinking, What am I looking at? It's this woman who is unapologetically black. Black, black, black. Not even a darkish brown aubergine." At Yale, Akunyili Crosby truly began to develop her artistic voice—though with little thanks to the institution itself. She graduated with an MFA in 2011 and won a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem the same year.

Later, Akunyili Crosby expressed distaste for Yale. "Yale was not a community," she told Heawood. "But I think of the Studio Museum as a family." At the Studio Museum, Akunyili

Crosby was introduced to the work of Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu. She appreciated the way Mutu's work demonstrated, as Solway put it, "that an image could be composed of many others." Other influences include the nineteenth-century French painter Édouard Vuillard, contemporary American figurative artist Alex Katz, and contemporary British artist Chris Ofili.

DROWN AND OTHER WORK

One of the first of Akunyili Crosby's works to capture dealers' attention was *I Refuse to Be Invisible* (2010), a painting that depicts Akunyili Crosby dancing with her husband. She sold three paintings to the New York gallery Fredericks & Freiser while still at Yale. (A legal dispute arose later when the gallery refused to tell her who they sold the pieces to. She bought back one of the pieces—*Nyado: The Thing around Her Neck* from 2011—for \$20,000, 150 percent more than its original price.) In 2016, Akunyili Crosby's painting *Drown* (2012), featuring a naked couple modeled after her and her husband, their bodies collaged with colonial images, sold at Sotheby's for \$1 million, far more than its \$200,000 estimate. In 2017, a portrait of her sister, similarly collaged with images of Nigerian women, called *The Beautiful Ones* (2014) and the first in the series of the same name, sold for more than \$3 million.

The art market has a dangerous tendency to kill artists' careers by driving the prices of their work too high too soon. Unsurprisingly, Akunyili Crosby characterized her breakthrough as quite stressful. "People expect me to be happy [about the money], but it put a spotlight on me in a way I don't like at all," she told Solway. "I like operating quietly, on my own, in the background." (In 2018, she appeared in a documentary about the excesses of the market and the commodification of art called *The Price of Everything*.) Akunyili Crosby has since made an effort to sell her pieces to museums. In 2018, she donated her striking pseudo landscape painting *Bush Babies* (2017) to the Studio Museum of Harlem for a benefit auction. The piece sold for \$3.4 million, a record for the artist.

Akunyili Crosby also enjoyed a solo show called "Front Room: Njideka Akunyili Crosby | Counterparts" at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2017. The show appeared at the Modern Museum of Art in Fort Worth, Texas, in 2018. The same year, she created a mural called *Obodo (Country/City/Town/Ancestral Village)* for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Her series "The Beautiful Ones," featuring portraits of Nigerian youth, went on display at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2018.

ARTISTIC PROCESS AND STYLE

Akunyili Crosby is a painstaking artist, making only eight or nine works each year. She tacks the fruits of her meandering process—images sourced from the Internet and family photos, scraps of novels and books about postcolonial theory—on the wall of her Los Angeles studio.

Akunyili Crosby's work subtly positions commentary on racism and colonialism within intimate domestic scenes. *Ike ya* (2016), for instance, captures an intimate moment between Akunyili Crosby and her husband; in it, she sits on a living room couch, and he hugs her waist. A number of later works depict kitchens and other domestic spaces. The walls in her paintings are often covered with family photographs. "I wanted to put out pictures of these parts of Nigeria that I knew and experienced," Akunyili Crosby explained to Solway. "People forget that life exists in these places. There are serious things that are wrong in the country, but people exist and thrive. We hang out. We get married. We talk as a family. We lie in bed together. I can't make this point enough. It's hard to think people matter if you don't feel connected to them. And so it's about making that connection."

PERSONAL LIFE

Akunyili Crosby met her husband at Swarthmore. They were married—twice: once in a church and once in a Nigerian village wedding—in 2009. They have a son named Jideora and live in Los Angeles.

SUGGESTED READING

- Dedieu, Jean-Philippe. "Njideka Akunyili Crosby's Intimate Universes." *The New Yorker*, 5 Nov. 2015, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/njideka-akunyili-crosbys-intimate-universes. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.
- Heawood, Sophie. "The Nigerian Artist Who Is Exploding the Myth of the 'Authentic African Experience.'" *The Guardian*, 3 Oct. 2016, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/03/nigerian-artist-myth-authentic-african-experience-njideka-akunyili-crosby-harlem-studio-museum. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.
- Solway, Diane. "Nigerian Artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby Is Painting the Afropolitan Story in America." *W Magazine*, 15 Aug. 2017, www.wmagazine.com/story/njideka-akunyili-crosby-artist-painter. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.
- Vankin, Deborah. "Njideka Akunyili Crosby: The Painter in Her MacArthur Moment." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Nov. 2017, www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-njideka-akunyili-crosby-20171102-htmlstory.html. Accessed 18 Feb. 2019.

SELECTED WORKS

Drown, 2012; *The Beautiful Ones*, 2014; *Ike ya*, 2016; *Bush Babies*, 2017

—Molly Hagan

Lauren Alaina

Date of birth: November 8, 1994

Occupation: Singer and songwriter

Country singer Lauren Alaina first gained widespread public attention in 2011, when she came in second place on the television talent show *American Idol*, then in its tenth season. Although her debut album received average critical reviews, her 2017 sophomore album, *Road Less Traveled*, became the most-streamed country album by a female artist that year and landed on multiple “Best of 2017” lists, including those compiled by *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone*. In April 2018, at the Academy of Country Music (ACM) Awards, Lauren Alaina was named New Female Vocalist of the Year.

“It’s been a crazy journey for sure, and it’s crazy that it took six years to catch on and to get some traction,” Alaina told Chuck Dauphin for *Billboard* (31 Jan. 2018). “I worked very hard on the music, writing on the *Road Less Traveled* for about four years.” Alaina explained the differences between her first and second albums, telling Dauphin, “I didn’t get to write the first album (2011’s *Wildflower*) at all that much—just one song. . . . But I got to take my time on the [second] album, and got to write every song on it. They are my actual stories. I think that made a difference, and I think that made me believe in the music even more.”

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

The singer was born Lauren Alaina Kristine Suddeth on November 8, 1994, in Rossville, Georgia, not far from the Tennessee border. Her mother, Kristy, was a transcriptionist, while her father, J. J., worked in Chattanooga as a process technician for the chemical company BASF. She has one brother, Tyler.

Alaina started to sing by the age of three, performing at her family’s holiday gatherings and in the choir of her church. (She is a devout Christian, who often professes her faith on social media and when speaking to journalists.) At age eight, she won a local talent contest, and the following year, she began appearing regularly at Chattanooga’s popular annual Riverbend Festival. Other local victories followed, and when she was ten, she triumphed over a thousand other young competitors at a national talent search held in Orlando, Florida. She soon began singing



Photo by John Ramspott via Wikimedia Commons

with the Georgia Country Gospel Music Association’s children’s group. No matter how small or obscure the venue, however, Alaina took every opportunity she could to perform, frequently traveling to Nashville on the weekends to sing at clubs accompanied by her father on the guitar. In 2009 she won a talent show held at the Lake Winnepesaukah amusement park, a family-owned enterprise in Rossville.

Alaina attended Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe High School in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, where she was a cheerleader. Although she hoped for a career in music, she also considered becoming a pediatrician or a special-needs teacher because of her love of children. When not in school she worked at the pizzeria chain Cicis, frequently singing as she stocked the salad bar or cleaned tables, much to the delight of patrons, as her manager later told reporters. She graduated from high school in 2013.

AMERICAN IDOL

In 2011 Alaina auditioned for the tenth season of *American Idol*, presided over by performers Steven Tyler, Jennifer Lopez, and Randy Jackson. Audiences got their first look at the bubbly teen during her initial audition in Nashville, where she sang Faith Hill’s “Like We Never Loved at All” and then performed Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing,” with Tyler, the lead singer of Aerosmith.

During the segment of the show in which viewers are introduced to the contestants, Alaina tearfully cited her cousin Holly Witherow, who had been diagnosed with a brain tumor, as her inspiration for singing. Her hometown fans

demonstrated their staunch support throughout the season. As *American Idol* paid for only one parent to accompany a contestant under eighteen, the family's neighbors raised money so that both of her parents could travel to Los Angeles to be with their daughter. Later in the season, Rossville dedicated May 14, 2011, as Lauren Alaina Day.

Throughout the competition, Alaina sang such tunes as "Hello, Goodbye" by the Beatles, "You Keep Me Hangin' On" by the Supremes, "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" by Aretha Franklin, and "Any Man of Mine" by Shania Twain. By the final round, which aired on May 25, 2011, the field of thirteen finalists had been whittled down to just her and Scotty McCreery, another young country singer. During the final show, Alaina sang a duet with former *Idol* winner Carrie Underwood, a personal hero of hers, before being named runner-up to McCreery. Following her second-place finish, she told Jennifer Still for *Digital Spy*, "I think everything happens for a reason and God has different plans for me. There are hundreds of thousands of people out there who would love to be second place in *American Idol* and I'm fortunate to get as far as I did."

WILDFLOWER

Following *American Idol*, Alaina was signed to a record deal with Mercury Nashville, 19 Recordings, and Interscope. She released her first single, "Like My Mother Does," in May 2011, which peaked at number thirty-six on the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart. On October 11, 2011, she released her debut album, *Wildflower*, which garnered lukewarm reviews. "Lauren Alaina is at her best on *Wildflower* when she's selling teenage stories of love, loss and freedom," Billie Dukes wrote for *Taste of Country* on the day of its release. "At such a young age, it'd be unrealistic to expect her to deliver an instant classic. *Wildflower* is the musical equivalent of puppy love. It comes on strong but doesn't stand the wear and tear of time and repeated listens." Despite the criticism, Dukes conceded, "Alaina's debut project shows she has plenty of potential and will be capable of big things in the next few years." *Wildflower* peaked at number two on the Billboard Top Country Album Chart.

Such mixed feelings on the part of critics did not prevent Alaina from being invited to perform at the Grand Ole Opry, on such television programs as the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and in front of President Barack Obama at the White House for a 2011 PBS special. Additionally, she sang the national anthem at the 2011 Thanksgiving Day game between the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers, and she performed a song on the televised *American Country New Year's Eve Live* in 2011. Alaina remained in demand

as an opening act throughout 2012, opening for Sugarland on their In the Hands of Fans Tour and appearing on the My Kinda Party Tour with Jason Aldean and Luke Bryan. She later opened for Underwood and Alan Jackson on their respective tours in 2016.

ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Alaina has acknowledged that she was bulimic throughout much of her teenage years and early career. "I was really sick. I don't know that person, I can't believe that was me," she told Jessie Van Amburg for *Time* (10 May 2016). "I just desperately wanted to be thin. . . . I was obsessed with it, which it was ridiculous because I had everything going for me. I was following my dream. Everything I wanted at the time, I was getting." She credits her mother's advice to look in the mirror each day and find positive things to focus on for her gradual recovery and healthier attitudes. In addition to her own eating disorder, Alaina was forced to contend with her father's alcoholism. Although he ultimately achieved sobriety, her parents divorced in 2013. Both remarried—her mother to Sam Ramker, who had been one of her father's good friends.

Alaina included these struggles when writing the songs for her second album, *Road Less Traveled*, which was released on January 27, 2017. Discussing all she had been through in the years before the album's release, Alaina told Taylor Weatherby for *Billboard* (8 Mar. 2017), "Those things gave me my story and made me who I am. I would go through those things a million times to feel the way I feel now and know the things I know now about myself. I really feel like I found myself, and when I found myself, I found the music along with it."

In a review of the album for *Taste of Country* (27 Jan. 2017), Cillea Houghton wrote, "Her vocals have matured vastly since her *Idol* days, exhibiting genuine emotion and pure control in her singing abilities." In particular, Alaina was rewarded for her work on the album's title track and its subsequent music video, which won the CMT Music Award for Breakthrough Video of the Year in 2017. Houghton concluded: "*Road Less Traveled* stands out at the core with its lyrics, all about empowerment, positivity and loving yourself no matter what you're faced with in life—valuable lessons to learn from a young artist who's managed to overcome adversity and turn it into art that aims to empower us all." The song "Road Less Traveled" also inspired a television movie of the same name, which starred Alaina and premiered on CMT on November 10, 2017.

The same year Alaina was featured on the song "What Ifs" by childhood friend and fellow country singer Kane Brown. The song spent five weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot

Country Songs Chart, and the music video for the song won Alaina and Brown the 2018 CMT Music Award for Collaborative Video of the Year. Alaina was also awarded the 2018 ACM Award for New Female Vocalist of the Year.

PERSONAL LIFE

Known for her commitment to philanthropy, Alaina traveled to Pyeongchang, South Korea, for the Special Olympics World Games in 2013, as an ambassador for Project Unify. In 2017 she founded her own charitable organization, My Kinda People. Named after the title of one of her singles, the nonprofit supports special-needs children and other causes.

In July 2018 Alaina became engaged to model Alexander Hopkins, whom she began dating in 2012.

SUGGESTED READING

Alaina, Lauren. "American Idol Runner-Up Lauren Alaina: Q&A." Interview by Jennifer Still. *Digital Spy*, 26 May 2011, www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a321723/american-idol-runner-up-lauren-alaina-qa. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Alaina, Lauren. "Lauren Alaina Talks Overcoming Personal and Family Struggles through Honest New Album: 'I Was Freed with This Music.'" Interview by Taylor Weatherby. *Billboard*, 8 Mar. 2017, www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/7717148/lauren-alaina-interview-road-less-traveled. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Blumberg, Perri Ormont. "Rising Country Star Lauren Alaina Reflects on Her Biggest Year Yet: 'I'm Just Really Proud.'" *People*, 13 Apr. 2018, people.com/music/acms-2018-lauren-alaina-really-proud-biggest-year-yet. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Dauphin, Chuck. "Lauren Alaina on Her Long Road to Becoming a Fresh Face in Country." *Billboard*, 31 Jan. 2018, www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/8097285/lauren-alaina-interview. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Dukes, Billie. Review of *Wildflower*, by Lauren Alaina. *Taste of Country*, 11 Oct. 2011, tasteofcountry.com/lauren-alaina-wildflower. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Houghton, Cillea. "Album Spotlight: Lauren Alaina, 'Road Less Traveled.'" Review of *Road Less Traveled*, by Lauren Alaina. *Taste of Country*, 27 Jan. 2017, tasteofcountry.com/lauren-alaina-road-less-traveled-album. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Van Amburg, Jessie. "American Idol Star Lauren Alaina Opens Up about Her Past Struggles with Body Image and Bulimia." *Time*, 10 May 2016, time.com/4324775/american-idol-lauren-alaina-bulimia. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

—Mari Rich

Jason Aldean

Date of birth: February 28, 1977

Occupation: Singer

Country music star Jason Aldean is known for a lengthy string of top-ten singles on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart such as "Big Green Tractor," "Dirt Road Anthem," "Fly Over States," "Take a Little Ride," "Night Train," "Lights Come On," "A Little More Summertime," "Any Ol' Barstool," and "You Make It Easy." Aldean has taken home a slew of honors—including a Country Music Association (CMA) Award for Album of the Year for his 2010 hit record *My Kinda Party* and Academy of Country Music (ACM) Awards for Entertainer of the Year in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

Despite those accolades, some observers have pointed out that the innovations he has brought to the country genre are not universally beloved. "With his hard rock and hip-hop influenced brand of country music, the Macon, Georgia, native is, to his detractors, the embodiment of how far country has drifted from its roots," Joseph Hudak wrote for *Rolling Stone* (28 Nov. 2016). Still, Aldean has made an undeniable mark on his industry. "We did help to shape the sound of country music for a generation," he told Hudak about his own work as well as more progressive peers such as Luke Bryan. "There is somebody right now sitting in a room listening to our songs trying to figure out how to play them. They'll be the next wave of country superstars."

Long a fixture on the country music scene, Aldean came to widespread notice even beyond



Photo by Tim Mosenfelder/WireImage