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# The Fugitive Underground of British Blackness Insights from London's 'Riotous' Geographies

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# The Fugitive Underground of British Blackness: Insights from London's 'Riotous' Geographies

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## Abstract

This paper historicizes the riotous geographies of British Blackness by focusing on three so-called "riots" in London's post-World War II development, the 1958 Notting Hill uprisings, the 1981 Brixton uprisings and the 2011 pan-London uprisings. Mobilizing debates in Black (British) Geographies, I challenge state narrations of these events as illegitimate expressions of Black Britons' political discontent. Based on archival research, I expose such framings as ongoing attempts of whiteness to render Black British geographies "ungeographic" within a supposed white British geography. Employing fugitivity as method, I show how these riotous events constituted possibilities for escaping racialized spatio-political categories of British state geographies. I consider British Blackness as political category and as a historically contingent discursive construction that mobilizes people from the African diaspora in specific ways but also stretches beyond them. Thus, I ask: How does Blackness continue to escape attempts of capturing it in and through British state geographies and in what ways does this escape constitute a transfiguration of Black British (un)geographies? The three historical cases I examine exemplify the struggles between the state's efforts to enclose and exclude Black Britons and their efforts to forge an underground of British Blackness in the wake of Empire.

## Keywords

Fugitivity, Black Geographies, riots, archive, London



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## Introducing the (Un)geographies of British Blackness

In Britain, debates around British identity have recently gained public attention due to the 2018 Windrush scandal, in which news reports documented at least 160 wrongful detentions and deportations of Caribbean-born immigrants recruited to live and work in the UK prior to 1973. In 2012, the UK government announced a “hostile environment” approach that denied undocumented residents the right to work in Britain, access to healthcare, education and banking services, and threatened the deportation or detention to countries that many had not lived in since childhood (Hewitt 2020). The 2012 policy did not achieve then Home Secretary Theresa May’s goal of reducing undocumented immigrant presence in the UK to mere “tens of thousands,” but it did succeed in creating a more hostile environment for immigrants and Black or other ethnic minorities who were subject to increased policing, denials of rental and job applications, and overt racism (Griffiths and Yeo 2021, 533). One of the stories that broke the scandal in 2018 was of Albert Thompson, who was evicted from council housing in 2017 and then denied NHS cancer treatment unless he could produce a British passport. Thompson had been living and working in Britain since the 1970s (Gentleman 2018).

The term “Windrush” refers to a generation of Caribbean immigrants, among the first of whom arrived in 1948 on the ship HMT Empire Windrush. To rebuild British cities and industries after WWII, the British government drew upon laborers from its former colonial holdings (Solomos et al. 1982). The 1948 Nationality Act facilitated their freedom of movement among British Commonwealth countries for this purpose, though many of the newly arrived immigrants were not provided with legal documentation of their right to remain in Britain (Hewitt 2020). Nonetheless, the immigrants’ arrival signaled a seemingly new way of being British, namely Black and British (Carby 2019). Though Black presence in Britain predated the arrival of the HMT Empire Windrush (Olusoga 2017), the ship’s arrival marked a particular conjuncture in Britain’s post-World War II history that allows us to reflect on the longer history of struggle by Britain’s African, Afro-Caribbean, and other racialized populations over what it means to be British in the wake of Empire.

The illegalization and expulsion of Black Britons after 2012 exemplifies the way that the British state legally and discursively frames Blackness as out-of-place in national space (Gilroy 1987; Hirsch 2018). Katherine McKittrick (2006) names this process as rendering Black people “ungeographic,” a process I understand here as a particular set of state spatial practices and discourses designed to deny and exclude Blackness from racialized constructions of the British state. Simultaneously, McKittrick and Black geographers describe how Black spatial practices and discourses refuse to be captured within such racialized “ungeographies”. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of “ungeographies” as a set of racialized British state constructions and ongoing contestations that mark Black British Geographies as a field of struggle (see Noxolo 2020; Hirsch 2021; Télémaque 2021).

The methods of struggle by which Black Britons evade state efforts to erase their legitimate presence in the British nation can be conceptualized through the analytical concept and historical practice of fugitivity (Bledsoe 2017; Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton, this issue; Wright 2020). As we will see below, the myriad ways that Black and other racialized people evaded or repurposed efforts to fix them beyond national space in post-WWII Britain resonate with the fugitive methods that African and African diasporic subjects have long employed to escape the enclosures of colonialism and plantation slavery (Dunnavant et al., this issue; Favini, this issue). Fugitivity invokes escape as an ambivalent and often prolonged experience, reflecting its significance as a condition rather than an event (Hirsch 2021). As a such, lived, daily practices that constitute fugitivity initiate a different sense of place (Télémaque 2021) and subvert racialized histories of total domination (Bressey 2002). By refusing racist state practices and discourses of erasure or enclosure, Black and other racialized Britons and immigrants to Britain instantiate a different sense of Britishness, that is, Black Britishness, thus forwarding an imaginary of space that runs counter to the mainstream vision of British geography as white (Noxolo 2018).

In examining three London uprisings as fugitive methods and counter-spatial strategies, I am responding to Patricia Noxolo's (2020) call to consider the co-constitution of Black British identities and the British city. Focusing on sites of uprisings ("riots" in state discourses)- in Notting Hill in 1958 and 1976, Brixton in 1981, and across the whole of London in 2011- I explore how these often-analyzed events might enrich our understanding of the fugitive terrain of Black Britain. These uprisings demonstrate the various dominant strategies of the British state to exclude Black Britons from urban space, and the more fugitive methods by which Black Britons have escaped and refused efforts to excise them from the spaces of the city, and thus, from the British nation. These contestations between state and (non)subjects have shaped both British urban geographies and British identity. Analyzing these struggles, I argue that these spatial practices of escape constitute the contingent material and discursive underground of British Blackness.

### **Refusing Riots**

I became motivated to analyze these three specific uprisings due to their portrayal in British state archives as "riots". Ubiquitous in state archival documents, the term "riot" has been utilized to racialize and criminalize Black British discontent through discourses of violence and political illegitimacy. I employ the term "uprising" to highlight these expressions of political dissent as result of the given conditions shaped by Britain's imperial legacies (see Dikeç 2007). In addition, I utilize the term "riotous" (Moten 2011, n.p.) to refer to Black British Geographies as lively sites of place-making, sites that refuse capture by racialized British state narratives and the erasure of Black presence and livingness that such narratives promote (McKittrick 2006). The place-making practices represented in these uprisings sustain a fugitive underground of British Blackness amidst racialized discourses surrounding the three uprisings. Arguably, my work requires paying particular attention to

processes of racialization to avoid the reproduction of a simplistic Black-white binary (Bonnett 2002; Nayak 2007).

My identity as white geographer is central to the production of this work, given how whiteness has sought to shape contemporary epistemologies of Black struggles through archival and curatorial practices (Carby 2019). By accounting for how the process of racialization informs epistemic assumptions of “political legitimacy”, this analysis challenges the power of whiteness to appear invisible for those who inhabit it (Bonnett 2002; Nayak 2007). This challenge entails a critique of whiteness and its epistemologies as well as foregrounding the assertion of Black Geographies within and beyond the bounds of whiteness (Shilliam 2013). In the context of the three uprisings, charting the active efforts of the state and other agents to reproduce racialized discourses of “riots” reveals the ongoing ways that whiteness operates to devalue or invalidate the political legitimacy of Black Britons’ dissent and their claims for belonging. Countering these state-centric discourses, I engage with Black and differently racialized Britons’ experiences of the three uprisings. By centering their experiences, I show how racialized spatial discourses and practices continue to be refused and follow their lead by refusing the transparency or supposed “facticity” of state narratives (Gayle 2020; Noxolo 2020). My racial privilege and my positioning in a discipline shaped by whiteness (Noxolo 2020) makes this a particular complex endeavor. But following Black British feminist thinking, I contend that taking methods of escape and refusal by Black and other racialized people seriously as political practice is particularly urgent in the wake of the Windrush scandal. Such an endeavor, however, does not only hold relevance in relation to Britain. Conducting this project as German citizen, I argue, also offers a template for grappling with the silences and histories of Black Germanness that are only recently being discussed (Florvil 2020; Lennox 2016).

The article proceeds as follows: I begin by introducing the fugitive underground, emphasizing the concept’s relevance in relation to existing accounts of the three uprisings and highlight my encounter with it throughout my archival research. Thereafter, I illustrate moments of escape from geographies of whiteness enabled by the fugitive underground of British Blackness during the three uprisings. In the conclusion, I point towards the fugitive geographies of British Blackness as permanent possibilities of escape and refusal.

### **The Fugitive Underground of British Blackness**

While the fugitive underground has been broadly conceptualized in the Americas (see Bledsoe 2017; Wright 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen and Vazquez Lopez, this issue), in Britain considerations of Black escape and refusal have only recently been foregrounded as practices that produce Black British Geographies (Bressey 2002; Gayle 2020; Hirsch 2021; Okoye 2021). Hirsch (2021) analyzes how Black Britons’ movements through space are surveilled or repressed rather than being practices that may also open and creation of alternative spaces (Hirsch 2021, 819). Gayle highlights female Black British online activism as an expression of Blackness that “moves across fabricated boundaries” within and against austerity (2020, 546). Like Gayle (2020), Okoye (2021) highlights online spaces, such as

Twitter, as fugitive expressions of Black British place-making that unfold amidst and against a racialized academic landscape. Highlighting these spaces as possibilities to transform her relation to academia, Okoye states: "Building these Black constellations on Twitter, just as in our material worlds, are always fugitive: always enabling other learnings, other sources, other thinking, other critiques" (2021, 808). Bressey (2002) draws on Gilroy's (1993) conceptualization of the Black Atlantic to emphasize the capacities of Blackness to escape the racialized boundaries of the British nation. Thus, Black British Geographies scholarship hints towards the multiplicity of movements, embedded in Black politics, unfolding within imperial-capitalist enclosures.

In the North American context, McKittrick (2006) theorized how the fugitive geographies of the Underground Railroad enabled Black clandestine practices and knowledges that allowed Black fugitives to escape the enclosure of the plantation. Through these practices and knowledges, Black fugitives spatialized Black Geographies as terrain of struggle that exposes racial disavowal whilst asserting the material presence of Black Geographies (McKittrick 2006). Following in McKittrick's lead, North American Black geographers stress the fugitive underground as a material and imaginative space through which Black fugitives and maroon communities flee capture (Bledsoe 2017; Wright 2020; see also this special issue).

"Riots" are rarely interpreted in popular discourse as legitimate political and spatial practices. Critiquing these popular perspectives, Hammond-Perry (2016) described how an imaginary of white Britain was constructed in public and governmental discourses against the backdrop of an increasing Black presence in relation to the 1958 Notting Hill uprisings. Hall et al. (1978) interrogated the social phenomenon of "mugging" and its racialized construction as "Black crime" by the British government leading to the 1981 Brixton uprisings. Gilroy (2011) outlines racialized governmental rhetoric and praxis behind the 2011 pan-London uprisings that place racism outside Britain. As Shilliam (2018) makes apparent, racialized narratives of white British identity continued to be foundational to the reformation of British state geographies during Brexit. These scholars emphasize how British Blackness continues to be rendered "ungeographic", or, invisible or external to racialized notions of "proper" place. Nevertheless, as Elliott-Cooper (2019, 540) shows, uprisings, such as the one occurring in London in 2011, open possibilities for Black and other racialized people to escape imperial induced hierarchies, such as the gender subordination of Black women. Campaigns against Black deaths in police custody, mostly led by Black British women, began to mobilize during and after the uprisings. By providing spaces to organize, engage with Black feminist thinking and plan actions, they reimagined racial and gendered notions, such as "family", in refusal of police practices and public discourses that followed the uprisings (Elliott-Cooper 2019, 551).

Though the North American context is often the focus of studies of resistance by African descended people, Elliott-Cooper (2019) argues that London is another important site of Black resistance to imperial ideologies. Bressey argues that Black Atlantic histories

often de-contextualize London as “simply the area being lifted out as a point of focus” (2002, 353). Similarly, while Gayle (2020) focuses on Black British experiences, she only hints at the urban dimensions of these experiences. Noxolo (2020) draws attention to this often-unquestioned association of Black British identities and the city, urging emerging Black British geographers to subject their co-constitution to analysis. Responding to Noxolo (2020) and following Simone (2016) and others’ emphasis on Blackness as a method of place-making, I consider the urban development of London as process that shapes and is shaped by imperial-capitalist enclosures but is also punctuated by instances of escape from such enclosures. The impetus and instances of escape inform my considerations of the fugitive underground of British Blackness.

Fugitive methods and Black British Geographies encounter each other in the wake of imperialism (see Sharpe 2016). This encounter rests on distinct yet interrelated Black Geographies on either side of the Atlantic. Fugitivity in North America continues to be shaped by settler colonial states and the afterlives of chattel slavery. Black British Geographies, on the other hand, is also influenced by racialized discourses developed in the imperial center, implemented and practiced in Britain’s colonies, and returned to the metropole in the context of post-World War II migration (Elliott-Cooper 2019, 541). Black geographers in Britain and the Americas emphasize Black politics as diverse, transnational movements, enacted across Black and differently racialized communities, to escape the racial-capitalist enclosures of the nation state (McKittrick 2013; Noxolo 2018). Black British geographers pay particular attention to how this movement forms an ongoing, yet always shifting, multi-ethnic ground of refusal. Given this diversity and contingency, Black British geographers stress that Black politics is necessarily fugitive, evading fixed locations and identities and refusing enclosure within a politics of recognition. As we see below, the fugitive underground of Black British geographies can be understood as a set of politics comprised of various maneuvers to escape essentialist geographies and diasporic identities whilst maintaining relations to the histories and present of anti-Blackness and Black struggle on both sides of the Atlantic.

I first entered London’s state archives to search for instances of Black British dissent in London’s post-World War II development. I began my research within the National Archives in West London and the London Metropolitan Archives. Analyzing juridical/court documents, police reports, policy documents and governmental correspondence in relation to the 1958 Notting Hill uprisings, this and other uprisings were represented as violent acts (“riots”), supposedly carried out by gang members that inhabit inner-city areas characterized by crime and squalor. Further, media reports available in the online British Newspaper Archive often projected Black spaces and lives in London as marked by deficits or lack, such as access to housing or healthcare. Reading these documents critically, these archives offered a picture of the myriad ways that the British state sought to render Black British lives ungeographic. To further unsettle whiteness curated in the National Archives, I moved to the Black Cultural Archives in South London and the George Padmore Institute. In these archives, I searched

for documents in relation to the three uprisings that conveyed the perspectives and experiences of Black and differently racialized Britons. Though nearly absent in government archival documents, in Black newspapers, bulletins and leaflets from Black organizations and Black eye-witness accounts, both critique of racist state discourses and practices and accounts of Black strategies of place-making emerged (see also Carby 2019). Finally, I listened to music about or emerging from the uprisings and their aftermaths, especially rap and Grime. Here I follow White's (2020) ethnographic work in which she highlights Grime as a form of contesting racialized spatial imaginaries and as an assertion of a Black British sense of place. Specifically listening to songs by Genesis Elijah (2011) and Logic et al. (2011), in relation to the 2011 pan-London uprisings allowed me to account for how young Black and differently racialized working-class Britons articulate new forms of place-making through cultural production. Music provided more robust accounts of Black resistance and refusal that escape the archival catalogue (see Gayle 2020).

My engagement with these archives was inspired by Sojoyner's (2021) work. Sojoyner understands his work as a fugitive archival practice, a direct contestation of state-sanctioned knowledge production and an active, ongoing praxis that informs the possibility of multiple ways of being. I am guided by the work of Black British geographers to assist in this practice (Joseph and Bell 2020; Télémaque 2021). For example, in his study of the imperial legacies that shape the geography London council estate, Télémaque (2021) forwards the fluid and mobile (i.e., fugitive) strategies that Black residents use to alter the space. In a similar vein, Joseph and Bell (2020) urge that scholars look beyond state archives or physical buildings to open up more fugitive practices of place-making and resistance. Not only is fugitivity a method by which Black and other racialized people evade the enclosures or exclusions of the (white) British state, but, as this special issue asserts, fugitivity is a method for producing knowledge. It foregrounds the pluralities of past and present Blackness embedded within British geography. It refuses the ongoing erasure of accounts that highlight Black British liveliness. Thus, while I assert that fugitivity offers a method by which Black Britons resisted their erasure in national space, it also offers an analytical challenge to the imperial epistemologies reproduced in the state archive. Applying fugitivity as an analytical method enables me to contribute to conversations around the production of Black British Geographies. Consequently, the three uprisings I document below highlight attempts by Black Britons to escape the multiple "ungeographies" produced by the British state.

### **Black Refusal at the Heart of White Britain**

In the years following the arrival of the *HMT Empire Windrush*, many people from the Caribbean, Africa and India moved from their homes in former colonies to the British metropole (e.g. to London, the West Midlands and the North West of England) (Pilkington 1988). During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the areas in which these immigrants settled were discursively constructed as "new slums" (Birmingham Daily Post 1954). This racialized rhetoric was enforced by London police forces, who frequently raided Black shops and restaurants and by trade unions that excluded Black workers (Birmingham Daily Post 1956).



In this regard, constructions of Black “ungeographies” expressed themselves in two ways. First, as the then president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah wrote in a letter to the Black people of Britain: “Where else can you go to seek survival, except in the ‘mother country’ which has enslaved you” (Nkrumah 1968, n.p.). In other words, Black freedom could only be imagined and conceived in the heart of empire. Second and in tension with the first, racialized governmental and public discourses created the imaginary of a white Britain, to which Blackness was always external (Gikandi 1996). These racialized public and state narratives served to maintain imperial hierarchies amidst increasing Commonwealth immigration. These discourses were materialized through practices that enclosed Black and other racialized ethnic groups in certain areas, often framed as non-places, lacking infrastructure, housing, sanitation, and life. Consequently, racialized discourses and practices are characterized through securing the arrival of a cheap labor force to Britain, whilst upholding the image of supposed powerful imperial Britain to which Blackness is either external or could be enclosed in certain areas.

Despite these state practices of “ungeographies” and the enclosure of Black lives in “slums”, Black spatial agency flourished. For example, through Black Housing Associations, which were mainly established by Caribbean migrants. Specifically, in forming networks of solidarity across different Afro-Caribbean nationalities, these Black Housing Associations enable new forms of Black living (Birmingham Daily Post 1954; Metropolitan Coloured People Housing Association Limited 1958). Black Housing Associations also facilitated the collective purchase of homes by people from the African diaspora at a time when racialized public and state discourses made renting publicly or privately became almost impossible for newly arrived migrants (see Metropolitan Coloured People Housing Association Limited 1958). Black Housing Associations then offered spaces for Black mutual living that could only be sustained through sharing of money or other forms of support. As such, while curated amongst racialized state narratives of Afro-Caribbean presence in Britain within the National Archives, the place-making practices of Black Housing Associations could not be fully captured by these narratives.

During the late 1950s fears of racial violence spread across Britain, as the White Defence League, the National Labour Party and Union Movements mobilized against Black workers (Bloom 2010; Pilkington 1988). These fears arose due to the reality of a declining British empire and because job quotas encouraged the employment of Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian workers (Bloom 2010; Gikandi 1996). Fears fueled by racialized discourses of a non-white Britain in which “white Britons” would not be able to find jobs materialized on the streets of Notting Hill in the form of white-on-Black violence. During the uprisings, residents of Notting Hill were encouraged by right-wing Britons to “keep Britain white”. Afro-Caribbean residents were hunted down, and their houses were set on fire. Galvanized by Afro-Caribbean resistance to racialized violence in Nottingham several days before, and supported by Black Britons from Brixton, Afro-Caribbean residents of Notting Hill defended

themselves with weapons against their attackers (London Metropolitan Police 1958; Pilkington 1988).

After the uprisings, reports by the London Metropolitan Police revealed that right-wing Britons as well as Black Britons were arrested mostly without the provision of legal aid (London Metropolitan Police 1958). While right-wing Britons sparked the uprisings, the Prime Minister promised to pay attention to “colonial people coming to Britain” (House of Commons 1958). Governmental committees cemented their racialized rhetoric that “coloured” immigration should be further legislated (Interdepartmental Committee on West-Indians 1959) and the Home Secretary argued against special action against right-wing movements (Daily Worker 1959). Thus, geographies of Blackness were established as problems under the rhetoric of the “colour problem” (Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail 1958). Such framing, which I encountered across British state and online archives, materialized itself through the Commonwealth Immigration Acts of 1962 and 1968. Both laws reduced the number of people from the African diaspora entering Britain. The 1965 Race Relations Act made it possible to arrest Black Britons when they were suspected of organized action (Black Panther Movement 1971a). Once more, racialized discourses of Black ungeographies and their material enforcements attempted to enclose Blackness. Moving beyond narratives curated in British state archives, it became evident that this enclosure of Blackness came under mounting criticism from Black Britons, who advocated an alternative sense of place beyond incorporation in white Britain. As expressed in Black British newspaper articles, people across the African diaspora sought to establish geographies beyond state control as: “The social institutions of Britain are no longer in tunes with the needs of our time” (Black Panther Movement 1971b, n.p.).

I consider the movement of Black Britons on the streets of Notting Hill as maneuvers that hold open the possibilities for escape from racialized ungeographic renderings in the uprising’s aftermath. This contrasts with Pilkington (1988), who argued that the Notting Hill uprisings foreclosed Political Blackness<sup>1</sup> due to competing Afro-Caribbean identities. In the uprising’s aftermath, a fugitive underground was formed which refused capture in imperial logics of “white Britain” by securing Black survival. Specifically, Afro-Caribbean organizations formed in the uprising’s aftermath overcame imperially- induced national divides. This transpired based on the common experience of racialized “(un)geographic” constructions, as “people came to regard themselves no longer as Trinidadian or people from Barbados but as West-Indian” (Black Panther Movement 1971b, n.p.). Organizations such as the Black Supplementary School Movement or the United Black Women’s Action Group in the following years, were set up across the African diaspora to secure survival and well-being of

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<sup>1</sup> Political Blackness emerged as coalitional identity in the 1960s-1970s (Solomos 2014). While Andrews (2014) argues that it delegitimized Blackness, rooted in a connection to the African diaspora, I use it to highlight its mobilization by people from the African diaspora and the shared Blackness of differently racialized political subjects (see Hall 1993).

the community. This was also done to assert Black presence within the imperial center. Racialized practices, and discourses of Black “ungeographies” were not simply refused through the spatial context of Notting Hill. Instead, they were transfigured towards transatlantic British geographies that were Black at heart, a Blackness crossing different African diasporic identities, and informing a sense of British Blackness. Arguably the fugitive underground did not merely challenge racialized British state geographies but sought to abolish them by demanding: “There must be a new Britain (...)” (Black Panther Movement 1971b, n.p.).

### **The Unruly Swamp: From Notting Hill to Brixton**

After 1958 Notting Hill became known as formative place of British Blackness, most notably through the inauguration of the Notting Hill carnival. The tradition of carnival, understood as amalgam of complex mimicry, mockery, and performances of leisure, derives from Caribbean cultures. As a spatial practice and imaginary of Black life in Britain, the carnival came under increasing police surveillance. The material enclosure of the carnival centered on governmental fears around Political Blackness, which in the late 1960s and 1970s aimed to remodel the realm of state politics through political activism and solidarity of African-descended, South Asian, and other ethnic minorities from former colonies.

During the 1976 carnival, youths from across the African diaspora decided to defend themselves and their carnival against state over-policing (Belfast Telegraph 1976). In their efforts, they were supported by young white British leftists (Race Today 1986). As the Black British newspaper *Grassroots* highlighted, these young people defended each other against an increasingly militarized police force (Grassroots 1978). After the ensuing 1976 Notting Hill uprisings, the district was labeled a “ghetto” by the deputy leader of the Greater London Council (GLC), highlighting its various lacks, such as housing and education, which were regarded as main causes behind the uprisings (GLC 1976). The framing of Notting Hill as “ghetto” did not just express racialized logics of a permanently alien Black population. It also legitimized policies to surveil the supposed “ungeographies” of the unruly or riotous “ghetto”. These policies included legislations that enabled police officers to stop and search people based on suspicion of committing a crime (Grassroots 1983). In contrast to racialized discourses of “the slum” that surrounded the 1958 uprisings, discourses of “the ghetto” were materialized through the increased militarization of police forces (Grassroots 1978). Even as the discursive and material terrain shifted between these uprisings, the fugitive underground continued to operate in and through the movement of young people. These solidarities stretched across the African diaspora and extended to young white British political dissidents (Race Today 1986).

Behind this turn to militarized policing stood the Conservative government which aimed to “bring back stability.” Invoking an idealized historical stability became necessary for shoring up geographies of whiteness in the face of miner and union strikes and urban protests against the government’s programs of austerity. Many of these protests took place in immigrant-dominated neighborhoods, (Bloom 2010). More than a response to Political

Blackness of the early 1970s, the notion of “stability” referred to economic stability, realized through a new sense of government entrepreneurialism and increased police surveillance of political dissidents. Simultaneously, processes of de-industrialization hit many workers, especially Afro-Caribbean Britons employed in Britain’s industrial sector after World War II, very hard. Many became unemployed and could not rely on support from local councils given their irregular legal status. The workers of the *Windrush* generation and their children were subject to increased police harassment and confronted with discrimination in the job market and the education system (Ministerial Group on Urban Policies 1977). As *West Indian World* newspaper summarized: “The youth have become angry against a future that holds no hope” (*West Indian World* 1985, n.p.).

In the context of neoliberal abandonment of immigrant and other workers in Britain and racialized discourses of criminality directed at poor Afro-Caribbean and other ethnic minorities, Operation Swamp 81 was initiated in South London in 1981. Operation Swamp 81 was intended to clear the “swamp” of Brixton of “Black gang street crime” through more than a thousand stop and searches and arrests carried out on the streets of Brixton (Grassroots 1981). Whilst the British government tried to rationalize its attempts to cleanse the unruly “ghetto” through racialized invocations of the dangers of mugging, young Black Britons from Brixton started to form lines of defense. In April 1981, at the Railton Road in Brixton, young Black and other racialized political dissidents from Brixton and other districts confronted police riot squads for several days (Department of Environment 1982, n.p.). The uprisings moved beyond the administrative confines of South London, linking Brixton to other racialized “ghettos” in cities, including “Moss Side” in Manchester or “Toxteth” in Liverpool (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1981) where uprisings occurred shortly afterwards. As the Jamaican immigrant, poet and musician Linton Kwesi Johnson, wrote in relation to the uprisings:

... Doun inna di ghetto af Brixtan  
Dat di babylan dem cause such a frickshan  
An it bring about a great insohreckshan ... (1981, n.p.).

After the uprisings, the British government began an investigation into their causes. The investigation’s report (the “Scarman Report”) was critical of some police practices but attested no systematic racism to the policing system (House of Lords 1981). It advocated that the state employ more Black police officers and strengthen ties with Black community leaders in the name of urban security and anti-crime measures. Black community organizations attempted to move beyond this enclosure of the fugitive underground of British Blackness exemplified by the state’s efforts to incorporate Black people into its policing projects. These organizations began defended young people arrested during the uprisings, hold community leaders and government officials accountable, and protested the Scarman Report’s conclusions (Brixton Defense Campaign 1981; Brixton Neighbourhood Community Association 1981; Centre News 1981). Black community organizations framed the uprisings as legitimate struggles against racialized oppression: “The Black Community

supports 100% the April uprising. It took the struggle against racist oppression to its highest level" (Centre News 1981, n.p.). In their efforts, these organizations sustained the fugitive underground beyond the moment of the uprisings. In protecting and sustaining this underground, they refused the state's efforts to delegitimize the uprisings as criminal activity, providing alternative interpretations of the uprisings as political dissent and legitimate use of urban space.

In the years after the Brixton uprisings, more Black community organizations formed across London. These organizations addressed issues facing people from the African and Asian diaspora such as limited access to National Health Services or housing on the grounds of irregular residence and employment status (Livingston 1982). Organizations like the Rastafarian Advisory Service offered support for people from the African diaspora in navigating Britain's racialized institutional landscape and the Southall Black Sisters provided legal support for African diasporic and Asian women who faced gender-related and racialized violence (Member of GLC 1984). Whilst these organizations offered paths for escape through multi-ethnic solidarity within Britain's imperial heartland, they still relied on the state for funding to keep their services going (Voluntary Voice 1986).

Because of their refusals during and after the uprisings of the 1970s and 80s and in line with its program of neoliberalization under Thatcher and the Conservative party, the British state successively withdrew financing from Black community organizations. The government implemented partnership programs making funding available via private sector investments. The British state based its new economic logic on the principle that funding could only be accessible if Black community organizations demonstrated a business side (Voluntary Voice 1986). These organizations documented the state's efforts to enclose the fugitive underground of Black self-help through neoliberalization, an effort that succeeded in limiting the kinds of activities that organizations could do without funding support (Battle Front 1988; Race Today 1986): "A whole generation of black political activists have come to feel that no action or organization is possible without outside funding" (La Rose 1986, 11). Nonetheless, the political momentum of 1981 was kept alive beyond traditional forms of political organization: "The revolutionary spirit is alive and well and lives in Handsworth, Tottenham and Brixton, while the revolutionary political movement flounders" (Race Today 1986, n.p.).

Arguably, the uprisings of the 1950s through 1980s and Black community organizations formed in their wake produced and sustained a fugitive underground of political dissidence and escape from constant pursuit by the British state. The state enacted legal, discursive, and material enclosures through policing, disinvestment, and anti-immigrant policies and legislation. Black and other racialized Londoners contested and evaded these efforts again and again. The history of the fugitive underground of British Blackness during this period is a testament to the struggle to produce and maintain Black British Geographies in the heart of white, (post)imperial Britain (Hirsch 2021, 820). This struggle was often multi-ethnic and manifested within the formal spaces of courtrooms or

meet rooms with local government officials as well as at urban “frontlines” in clashes between self-defense groups and militarized police (Gilroy 2011; Hammond-Perry 2016). The fugitive underground of British Blackness enabled these diverse, mobile and fluid responses to the British state, keeping open possibilities for multi-ethnic solidarities and sustaining Black British Geographies within and beyond the bounds of whiteness.

### **Black Self-Help as Party**

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, British state efforts to eviscerate Black community organizations through relations of dependency continued. This period saw further cuts to social services. Securing governmental funds became especially difficult since often including the word “Black” was seen as problematic because it was regarded as political. These policies, as Black community organizations reported, placed Black groups under higher suspicion than other similar groups (Community Care 1994). Arguably, governmental cuts paired with the promise of funding through public-private partnership models exemplified efforts to shut down the fugitive underground of British Blackness. Youth clubs in multi-ethnic, working-class areas like Tottenham were shut down (Grant 1997). The steady decrease in governmental funding accelerated after the global financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent austerity politics. Against the backdrop of austerity policies and protests by students and trade union movements, the commemoration of the death of Mark Duggan at the hands of a police officer in Tottenham in 1985 triggered uprisings across British cities in 2011 (Morgner 2014). Mark Duggan was a 29-year-old Afro-Caribbean and Irish British citizen from the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, a heavily policed council housing estate in North London (Hill 2014). In 2011, family members of Mark Duggan and residents of Tottenham staged a demonstration in front of the Tottenham police station demanding answers for his death and protesting police violence against community residents (Bridges 2012). According to reports, police attacked a 16-year-old girl after she allegedly threw a leaflet (Beckford 2011), sparking uprisings first in Tottenham, and then spreading to Hackney, Brixton and Clapham as young people clashed with and defended one another against London’s police forces. The ensuing situation was one of reversed social order. London’s police forces were forced to flee as young people across London literally ran the city for several hours (Morgner 2014) while uprisings spread across Britain. Gilroy (2011) rightfully argued that Blackness in the context of the 2011 uprisings cannot be simply understood in relation to the experiences of Afro-Caribbean Britons but became a unifying banner and a method for expressing political discontent for various racialized and marginalized Britons. The 2011 uprisings spawned a new wave of music that emerged from these besieged Black British Geographies and that took aim at the British racial state (Charles 2016). As the two musicians, Lowkey and Khalil remarked in their song “*Dear England*”:

... Who’s the government, a government that can’t govern  
Can’t you figure its ways bigger than Mark Duggan ...

Cut education, privatise prisons  
Surprised by theft when it's organised,  
But mass immorality is normalised ... (2011, n.p.).

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, Blackness expressed itself as a "riotous party for self-defense" (Moten 2011, n.p.) during which anger of various racialized young Britons was transformed into a generative euphoria over successfully defending themselves against police forces. While the uprisings could be read as signaling a return of Political Blackness in Britain, it was a Political Blackness transformed. Rather than uniting various post-colonial subjects against British imperialist ideologies as in its earlier heyday, it reached across different racialized groups linked by the common experience of economic deprivation and racism in neoliberal, urban Britain. The uprisings of 2011, distinct to the 1981 uprisings, did not seek change the realm of state politics. Rather, this Political Blackness transformed the nature and aftermath of the uprising itself, namely by enacting articulating a more unruly sense of urban place that refused the British nation and its racialized imaginary of (white) ordered, political space.

In the uprisings' aftermath, Black Britons were overwhelmingly sentenced, whilst charges against Mark Duggan's killer were dropped (Hill 2014, 30). Police reports established notions of "mob-hysteria" and gang membership (Craig 2011) to create images of "greedy rioters" who had stolen for their own benefits (Morgner 2014, 96). Racialized public discourses focused on "violent Black youths," a discourse that activists rejected. In a BBC interview conducted immediately after the uprisings with Black activist Darcus Howe, the interviewer asked Howe if he condones the violence expressed in the uprisings that occurred the previous night, to which Howe reframed by stating:

Of course I don't condone. What I am concerned about, more than anything else, is there is a young man called Mark Duggan. He had parents, he had brothers, he had sisters and few yards away from where he lives a police officer blew his head off ... They have been stopping and searching young Blacks for no reason at all. I have a grandson. He came of age when the police slapped him against a wall and searched him. I asked him: How many times did the police search you? He said: Papa, I can't count there are so many times ... (Howe 2011, n.p.).

Howe did not only refuse discourses about Black violence or criminality, but also refused media and government narratives that asserted that looting was the direct result of poor parenting. He persuasively argued that "good parenting" necessitates action against the systematic policing and state-sponsored violence that Black children routinely experience. Moreover, Howe argued that state constructions of Black Britons as lacking respect for property makes them ungeographic, out-of-place or not belonging in British place-cum-property. Instead, Black British geographies value the lives and well-being of human people over the security of property.

Refusals to be contained or excluded by ungeographic discourses persisted well beyond the 2011 uprisings. This is especially evident through music, mostly Grime (White 2020). Grime is a hybrid music genre, fusing elements of rap, dancehall, Jamaican and UK sound system culture as well as UK Jungle and Garage. As such, Grime is both distinctly Black and British. Arising in East-London in the early 2000s, Grime became a vehicle for Black and differently racialized Britons to assert their sense of place and belonging amidst state discourses of an “alien population” living on London’s council estates (White 2020).

Through lyrics and beats, Grime allows racialized inner-city youths to escape their ungeographies. This escape does not unfold slowly but occurs rapidly at 140-beats per minute (bpm). Lyrically, Grime transforms these supposed ungeographies into imaginative spaces where racialized state discourses and practices can be challenged and provides a genealogy of struggle that upholds Black British resistance. For example, Logic et al. (2011) connect the 2011 uprisings and the 1981 Brixton uprisings: “I say you bring the Brixton riots back” (Logic et al. 2011). Addressing the British government directly, they point out the ongoing racialized ungeographic discourses and police practices that gave rise to, and unfolded in the aftermath of, the 1981 uprisings. Through the fugitive space of Grime, Logic et al. (2011) are thus able to curate Black British histories beyond state archives, hereby enabling routes of escape from state narratives of criminality or crisis. Moreover, they call upon differently racialized working-class British to maintain multi-ethnic solidarities after the 2011 uprisings. Contesting governmental and public discourses of greedy, young individuals in search for monetary gains, they argue that it only poor and racialized people whose desire for financial security is illegitimate:

But in this life we still chase it [money]

And they glorify it on the tele

Mimicking celebrity station so they want the belly

But we act like we can’t eat off the same plate ... (Logic et al. 2011, n.p.).

Grime and rap after 2011 shaped an aesthetic and artistic fugitive underground which had room for self-critique as well as visions of political unity and community. In his song “RE: UK Riots”, Genesis Elijah (2011) criticized the looting whilst praising Black solidarity:

... We all came together last night for that I am grateful

If you are a real rebel fight the power not the powerless ... (Genesis Elijah 2011, n.p.).

## Open Ways

I started this essay by asking how we might understand the history of urban uprisings and state violence in London as the grounds for the fugitive terrain of Black Britain. I followed the fugitive underground of British Blackness from the 1958 and 1976 Notting Hill uprisings, the 1981 Brixton uprisings, to the 2011 pan-London uprisings. I showed that it is



through Black political expression, materialized through multi-ethnic solidarities forged in and through movement and protest, that British Blackness continuously transfigures itself. Today British Blackness holds open possibilities to escape from racialized governmental enclosures of immigrant and racialized British people in external and internal “ungeographies.” In each of these sites and moments, the British state imposed racialized discourses of Britishness that were materially enforced through exclusionary policies and police violence. However, Black and differently racialized Britons refused this hierarchical socio-spatial sense-making by performing alternative fugitive versions of Black Briton.

Taking the Windrush scandal as moment of possibility to consider how racialized Britons escape the British state’s rendering of them as “ungeographic,” I argue Black British Geographies are not “the lands of no one” (McKittrick 2013, 6) but rather as *lands of not One*. Thus, with Black British geographers, Afro-Caribbean and immigrant activists, and urban Grime artists, I emphasize Black British Geographies as an ongoing, shifting project of asserting the continued Black presence in and production of the British nation. Traced across sites and moments of uprisings, we see that that this project of asserting Black presence leaves open the heterogeneous and historically contingent experiences and identities that shape Black presence (*not One*). Given this history, I argue that Black British Geographies cannot be accounted for only in terms of their foreclosure. Rather, such attempts at fore/enclosure by the British state are countered with efforts to escape or refuse racialized British geographies. This escape is ambivalently experienced and does not always constitute a complete transformation of British geographies. Nevertheless, it holds open the possibility of understanding Black British Geographies as terrain of political struggle on its own terms, beyond a reaction to the politics of whiteness (Noxolo 2020).

Black British Geographies offer us ways to think about the spatial politics of racism and Blackness beyond the Americas. Geographies of Blackness, throughout the Americas as well as in Britain, continue to be shaped by the aftermaths of slavery, albeit in historically and presently contingent ways. I argue that the plantation alone does not offer a sufficient spatial metaphor to account for anti-Blackness and African diasporic organization in Britain. To paraphrase Sharpe (2016), it is *in the wake of empire* that Black British Geographies must be understood. The metropolitan (imperial) city offers a crucial spatial category where constitution of Black British culture and British urban geographies emerge. As I have shown, it is in city that British state geographies are reproduced through imperial epistemologies and racialized state policies, but also where they are undermined by Black place-making as urban dissent. Further, as the three uprisings and their aftermaths showed, the fixing of Blackness within a single geography or group is refused in favor of contingent, and recurring, multi-ethnic solidarities. Thus, London, as former imperial metropolis, provides the fugitive underground through which Black British Geographies continually seek to escape imperial logics, and where they are continually chased by them. Though I have accentuated African diasporic experiences in Britain, the uprisings suggest a framework through which we can account for the various formations that hold open possibilities for escape from empire.

Thus, fugitivity can be considered as method of escape from British racial state enclosures, enacted in daily acts of Black self-help, in multi-ethnic uprisings and through music. As a method of research, fugitivity also requires us to move away, and escape from, archives that reproduce renderings of Black lives as “ungeographic”. Fugitivity as a method does not only inform a critique of whiteness but uplifts Black British spatial practices and imaginations that refuse its capture. It allows for Black British Geographies to be considered on their own terms. This refusal does not deny the real presence of British white supremacy and imperialism; rather it shows that the spatial contours of Black British Geographies refuse their positioning outside the British state or as “left-overs” from past imperial projects.

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