Victor Curiel, Idaho State University, graduate student, "The Sun Only Sets on Black Britons: Sexuality and the Notting Hill Riots"

Abstract: Late into August 1958, a gang of white youth unleashed a catastrophic wave of targeted violence against Black migrants in the areas around Notting Hill and Nottingham. The event came to be known as the Notting Hill and Nottingham riots. The riots served as a watershed moment, allowing government members to capitalize on race as a problem and eventually limit Black entry into the country and validate unequal access to opportunities and support. However, the riots merely served as kindling to a destructive discourse of race relations already taking place, constructing a narrative that saw Black individuals as foreign, dangerous, agents of destruction that brought destabilization and incivility. The Riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill are a story of how racial discrimination, political isolation, and a preoccupation with preconceived inappropriate interracial sexual interactions created instances of mass violence conditions. This study seeks to link the newly formed scientific discourse within the field of race relations that developed in Britain in the early postwar years and their connection, extension, and complacency of perpetuating colonial preoccupations of what Britain has considered appropriate sexual interactions, national membership, and race consciousness and the resulting violence used to maintain those ideals.

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The Sun Only Sets on Black Britons: Sexuality and the Notting Hill Riots
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"[A friendly girl] told me where she lived and I went to call for her one night. And her mother opened the door. Oh, she went bananas. Oh, she went mad! I thought she were gonna have the door off the hinges. It's a good job my fingers weren't in the door, she'd have broke them!"[1]

The experiences of Jennifer, a child born of mixed race, are reflective of the prevailing attitudes and reactions that Black people often encountered in largely working-class neighborhoods where economic competition often created hostilities with white indigenous groups and Black migrants. Although the manifestation of large-scale violence and riots, both were sporadic and largely the result of anxieties regarding interracial sexual encounters rather than economic insecurities, which were intrinsically connected to a contested nature of Black belonging in spite of their British nationality. A point alluded to by multiple Home Intelligence Reports and sociological studies suggesting that white Britons' greatest qualm regarding Black bodies during WWII involved their encounters with white women.[2] The Notting Hill Riots in 1958, an incident that saw frustrated white working-class youth attack Black migrants, was a confirmation of state and scientific hypothesis regarding the inevitability of violence when indigenous Britain's were exposed to interracial sexual encounters or forced to confront a destabilization of colonial interpretations of British identity and belonging. The riots served as extensions of working-class understanding of scientific and state discourse that suggested that Black bodies were only acceptable so long as they remained both transient and foreign. Most importantly, scientific and state discourse suggested that interracial sexual encounters were the root cause of white working-class destruction as those sexual encounters both subverted racially hierarchized labor systems and undermined colonial conceptions of British identity.[3] However, according to the law, the British Black Diaspora that arrived during this post-war period were British Citizens same as their white counterparts and were not only legally allowed to migrate but even subtly encouraged to do so by some members of government due to labor shortages and

declining birth rates.[4] Despite that fact, there was a deep suspicion regarding who the new

migrants were, especially after it was made clear that they intended to make their way to Britain

whatever the cost and remain there permanently.[5] It was made clear late into August 1958 for

white working-class youth that the newcomer's intentions in the mother country involved

coercing white women into sexual liaisons. So, when a gang of white men witnessed a Black

man conversing with a white woman at one of the few bars that allowed Black patronage. The

disgruntled youth unleashed a wave of targeted violence against Black migrants in Notting Hill,

a working-class London neighborhood, and Nottingham, a city in central England with

traditionally industrial outlooks, after witnessing the potential for interracial mingling. The riots

served as both proof and extensions of the scientific discourse regarding interracial relationships,

suggesting the impossibility of harmonious multiracial interactions. Likewise, government

members using the scientific language of the new sociological school of race relations openly

capitalized on race as a central problem of economic and moral decay, eventually limiting Black

entry into the country and validating the promotion of unequal access to opportunities and

support. What emerged was a re-emphasis by local, national, and intellectual circles of a

narrative that saw Black individuals as foreign and dangerous agents of destruction that brought

destabilization and incivility. The Riots in the areas surrounding Nottingham and Notting Hill are

thus a story of how racial discrimination, political isolation, and a preoccupation with

preconceived inappropriate interracial sexual interactions created the conditions and promotion

of mass violence against Black bodies. This Chapter seeks to link the newly formed academic

field of race relations with the ideological rhetoric that pre-dated that scientific discourse and

their relationship, extension, and interdependence in upholding colonial preoccupations of what

Britain has considered appropriate sexual interactions, national membership, and race

consciousness—resulting in a conflicting understanding of who belonged and a scientific opposition towards interracial sexual encounters that inadvertently convinced those in close proximity to the Black people that they ought to be the moderators of those interactions.

Early in the twentieth century, there was a general understanding by the British public that being Black essentially meant just not being white, and that included Africans, West Indians, South Asians, Indians, and a plethora of other ethnically and culturally different people, a particularly useful rhetorical tool to justify the exploitation of any group outside the white metropole.[6] The very simple understanding of race should then be situated within an economic framework where racial hierarchies served as tools of imperial power and imperial wealth, broad enough to be used whenever necessary. The resulting correlation of Black or Coloured as both foreign and expendable before and after the post-war period had direct implications to the metropolitan elite's material needs. On the other hand, the proletariat attempted to replicate that power imbalance, often using violence as a means of performative theater in an elaborate process to convince themselves that they could regulate economic factors over which they had no control. The power imbalance gave an impetus for the continued maintenance and control over Black bodies by various classes, which often emphasized distinctive racialized gender codes. Furthermore, it was the regulation of white British women's autonomy that was of particular concern. [7] To illustrate, settler colonies often implemented laws that only saw white women's sexuality safeguarded. The lucrativeness and forbidden nature associated with their sexuality were inseparable from the performative aspects of imperial power.[8] However, unlike many of her colonies and protectorates, there weren't any laws that outlawed interracial relationships on the British statute books.[9] State and local actors nonetheless represented interracial relationships as deviant behavior mythologized as affairs that involved grimly actors outside of the normative

state.[10] The socially constructed gender codes also reveal anxieties of sexual identities exacerbated by an understanding of males as the main actor in the public sphere and the main economic contributor—a disastrous pairing and assumption in the face of massive demobilization and economic recession. Besides financial stressors, a seemingly uncontrollable future also heightened the need to control some facet of daily life. The Black body became a focal point of social control and resulted in a need to perform in overly violently masculine ways, to emphasize both their whiteness and convince themselves of their identity and place within heteronormative society. Consequently, there are two instances where this conflicting internal and external social regulation exploded into violence. The riots that occurred in various dock towns in 1919 and the attacks 30 years later in Notting hill, the former leading to various sociological inquires that tried to identify the social problems that set off the rioting, concluding that interracial sexual relationships and, by extension, the offspring of those interracial relationships were the cause of violent outbreaks in multiracial societies.

The implication that interracial sexual encounters could drive groups of men to seek out violent measures already had a precedent with the highly publicized 1919 riots. In comparison in postwar England, tabloids reinvigorated these anxieties with titillating stories of towns like "Tiger Bay," a town in Cardiff that became a site of Black migration and was uncoincidentally the site of the 1919 riots. The town served as a case study of the perceived dangers that interracial sexual encounters could have on society, and multiple magazines capitalized on those fears by writing sensationalist pieces describing mixed-race towns as filled with "a steady quota of stories of murder and robbery for the press."[11] Another person describing mixed-race communities as "A tragedy [for] the life of the children of [interracial] marriages."[12] The apprehension of racial mixing and the violence that would emerge from those sexual encounters

are reminiscent of the arguments prevalent in scientific circles of the 1920s and 30s, along with

the arguments made by government officials of Rhodesia, South Africa, and other colonies that

actively segregated or punished interracial sexual encounters.

A narrative perpetuated by historical, international, and public assumptions of white

female sexual competition being the source of conflict in multicultural localities set the

foundations for the new field of race relations. So, the academic field positioned the newcomer's

arrival along the same vein as the regurgitated notions of misunderstanding and conflict,

postulated by eugenicists and early race studies. [13] A particular emphasis continued to be placed

on interracial relationships as a cause of racial conflict, understanding that it was the Black

migrant's fault for rising social tension resulting from them "retaining those cultural elements

that are alien to English society.[14] To add to that, Britain's role on the world stage started

vanishing in place of the communist specter or the Americans. Britain's diminishing role as a

distinct world power led to a national self-representation crisis and a reconfiguration of what it

means to be a British Citizen.[15] This process inevitably involved race and gender in an empire

with a multiethnic composition, especially when it became clear that the Black migrants were not

going to be transient groups, thus intensifying the need to reconfigure racial and gendered

hierarchies. Chris Waters argues that "the attempts to reimagine the national community in the

1950s depends on reworking established tropes of little Englandism against the migrant other, an

other perceived as a "stranger" …"[16]The effect of emphasizing a mythical British identity

distinct from the colonial periphery offered the displaced collective a sense of belonging,

solidarity, and comradery in the face of loss and perceived effeminacy. Thus, the Black migrant

was defined against a mythical national culture that set whiteness as a prerequisite. The phrasing

nationality or citizenship used interchangeably with the word race further excluded Black

migrants from participation in the development and restructuring of a national identity

reinforcing the construction of the "dark stranger."

The scientific field's characterization of "the dark stranger" strengthened and

corroborated the public's anxieties through biased quantifiable scientific measures, interviews,

and reports.[17] In Shelia Patterson's interviews of local white Britons and their reactions to the

newly arrived migrations, a common theme remerged that presented the two groups'

intermingling as incompatible, a critique of the newcomers' inability to assimilate to an English

way of life.[18] The narrative of interracial relationships being both an unnatural social

phenomenon or a cause for social problems was a well-defined trope. However, the seemingly

unbiased nature of race relations in the post-war period made those accusations appear all the

more credible.

Consequently, government members used the discourse surrounding nationality and race

to reaffirm that Black migrants were intrinsically different from the rest of Britain. The idea of

race was a crucial factor in informing cultural difference echoed in Major Sir David Maxwell

Fyfe's response to the 1948 British Nationality Bill claiming that "[citizenship] must always be

equated with some homogeneity and some true community of interest and status. The position

from which one cannot get away is that the new citizenship creates a legal category for the

inhabitants of these islands, which does not correspond to any division of the

Commonwealth."[19]Fyfe's argument seeks to perpetuate a particular idea concerning Black

colonial Britons; their race instantly makes them outsiders who have a different culture, and that

difference in culture will pave the way for lawlessness, stating in a secret memorandum:

> "Complaints are becoming more frequent that large numbers of coloured people are living on National Assistance or the immoral earnings of white women, and special objection has been taken to the way in which some coloured people acquire tenancies of old property..."[20]

Fyfe's remarks are alarmist in nature, but they are accurate representations and extensions of agitated, working-class sentiments regarding the reality of an economic market that allowed Black migrants access to the capital once unattainable to them. Parts of government were well aware of the potential problems that the competition for housing would cause, writing, "Property has been bought up by coloured landlords, who have then made the position of white tenants intolerable, and entire streets have gone over to a colored population."[21] The complaints by various respondents in national and sociolegal inquires have sinister intentions and repercussions. For example, they fixated law enforcement's gaze onto specific people and communities. To illustrate, in Newcastle, a squad was formed to look into the allegation that Black men were drugging white girls during "sweet tea and vice parties."[22] Along with Black migrants' responsibility for increased crime and poverty rates is the assertion that white women are particularly at risk of falling victim to the newcomers' cultural depravity. The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer referenced the Cleveland and Middlesbrough Association for Moral Welfare annual report linking social depravity with interracial relationships stating that "The inevitable result [of interracial sexual relationships] is a drift towards prostitution."[23] Besides associating Black Migrants with crime and otherness, there was particular concern among the media, social scientists, and the government regarding white women's sexual promiscuity. National leaders and local actors recognized that interracial relationships were bound to appear but sought to regulate them anyways. The chauvinistic conception that women constantly need their sexual innocence protected from a barbaric threat thus confines women to a perpetual

childlike status placed in conjunction with a declining empire where women become

interchangeable with the nation and their sexual vulnerabilities become that of the state. These

ideas validated working-class youths' assumptions that Black men must be dealt with lest the

nation is lost.

In an interview with Edward Pilkington, Jean Maggs gives insight into how narratives

concerning interracial sexual interactions were reformulated and repositioned to generate a

generalizable prototype of the Black transgressor. She states that after her father had found her

talking to a black neighbor, he wouldn't speak to her for two weeks, and following the incident,

she remembers that "It was our parents who drummed it into us and so we hated the blacks. They

said they had come to take our jobs and our homes."[24]Maggs' parents never overtly referenced

the perceived sexual vulnerability and myth of Black male violence, but the situation that caused

the social isolation and scolding indicated that sexual anxieties drove the response. The message

was clear: Transgressing sexual and racial norms leads to danger, and when women did not heed

the warnings of their peers or did not fit the mold of social outcasts or prostitutes, they were

characterized as "gender outlaws and disparaged as sociopaths."[25] White women essentially

transferred the negative social implications onto themselves whenever they entered into an

interracial relationship that was visible and acknowledged by the public. Thus, when a group of

boys saw Majbritt Morrison, a young Swedish woman in a public relationship with Raymond, a

West Indian, they insisted on harassing her. A neighbor pointed her out to a group of men, at

which point they began to point and shout, "There's another one, another black man's trollop!

White trash! Nigger Lover! Get Her! Kill her!", starting four consecutive nights of riots.[26]

Detective Sergeant M Walters of the Notting Hill police was most adamant in reassuring

Home Secretary Richard Butler that the incident's projection as a race riot was wrong in his

official report. Suggesting instead that "there certainly was some ill feeling between white and

coloured residents in this area, it is abundantly clear much of the trouble was caused by ruffians,

both coloured and white, who seized on this opportunity to indulge in hooliganism." [27] However,

race was a central facet of the violence, the anxieties regarding interracial sexual encounters

directly led to the outbreak of violence. Downing Street concluded as much, stating, "they

appeared to originate largely in competition for housing and casual employment; and they were

aggravated in some cases by disputes about women."[28] Regardless of the terminology used, both

the national government and local government tried to give explanations that made it seem as

though both the Black victims and white aggressors were equally responsible for the riots, while

the newspapers early on in the nearly three weeks of "nigger hunting" strictly chose to run stories

of Black aggression in the affair.[29] However, what became increasingly clear after the St Ann's

riots was that young white men and women performed acts of violence as a celebration of their

power and displayed to the Black migrants of their superior status in society. The public display

of unchecked violence through the attacks on perceived others were performative acts of cultural

theater, demonstrating the rioter's social status. Both the Nottingham riot and the Notting Hill

riots a week later are clear examples of this performative act. Sparked when groups of white men

were agitated at their inability to protect or attract white women, deciding instead to enforce

gender and racial norms and prove their national status was not being threatened by attacking the

state and minorities.[30] Government members, led by Cyril Osborne and Martin Lindsay,

reaffirmed the validity of the rioters who claimed in the wake of the bloody attacks,

"[Immigration control] refers to the idle, the unfit and the criminal, with the request that they

should be excluded, and that the criminal should be deported to their country of origin." While at

first Lindsay subtly alludes to the myth of the pathology of Black criminality, he then makes sure

to be explicit regarding his attitudes concerning Black migrants stating, "We all know perfectly

well that the whole core of the problem of immigration is coloured immigration."[31]

The government and the general public, fueled by horrific stories of mixed-race children

and the social degeneracy that inevitably accompanies interracial sexual relationships, acted to

correct deviations from societal prescribed and scientifically confirmed gender and racial roles.

Social control involved violence, either physical, emotional, or rhetorical, to degrade and

symbolically reaffirm that the racial hierarchies and gender hierarchies were indeed appropriate

social constructs. The social sciences and media from the 1930s into the 1960s largely

corroborated those anxieties; although the language became increasingly less explicit, the

conclusion or idea of Black people being incompatible with British culture remained the same.

The parallels that appeared within various government circles regarding interracial relationships,

mixed-children, and the sexual vulnerability of white women, maintained that Black people's

expulsion was the only reasonable response to scientific inquiries suggesting that social problems

were intimately attached to those relationships. Similarly, the violence that erupted over three

weeks in London was a communally produced transgression; the rioters perceived that the white

social scientist and white government members condoned their actions in a unified dismissal of

Black people.

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