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The Black Migration Experience in 20th Century Great Britain
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The post World War II (WWII) time period, also known as the Swinging London Era, was a time of cultural and social change. London had been a center for migration since the passing of the British Nationality Act of 1948. The British Nationality Act encouraged colonial residents to come to Britain to help with post-war reconstruction. The act stated anyone born in the empire or the Commonwealth colonies had the right to obtain British citizenship. This time period was difficult for many people because mass migration into Britain was inevitable. Mass migration from the West Indies, a sector of the black community, rose dramatically from about “15,000 in 1951 to 238,000 at the beginning of 1962”.¹ Commonwealth citizens were entering Britain in hopes of finding jobs, education, and better opportunities. The majority of migrants, specifically the blacks, who arrived in London after WWII settled in Notting Hill and Brixton. The experiences of the West Indians who migrated into London during the 1950s are described to be full of “tensions, confrontations, and disappointments”.²

The tensions produced from Commonwealth migration left black migrants living in a state of, “poverty, unemployment, rotten housing”.³ After the British government passed the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, due to the concerns produced from mass immigration, few to any of the black migrants trying to get into Britain were allowed in. Migrants who were allowed into Britain and chose to stay were subjected to discrimination and racism from police officers, immigration officers, and their fellow neighbors. The Commonwealth Immigration Act produced strict immigration controls leading to violence in the form of race riots. Race riots occurred in both Notting hill and Brixton, both towns were populated by a majority of black people

¹ Clive Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 275.

² Lucía Stecher and Elsa Maxwell, 813.

³ Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 354.

from the Caribbean. The Notting Hill and Brixton riots were started by the white British to stop the migration of colored people. White Britons believed black migrants were taking their homes and jobs. Tensions between the two communities began over “cultural differences, language, religion, schooling and more”.⁴ The racial hatred and violence was fomented by white fascist groups and the white British upbringing, which were tolerated by police insensitivity and poor practice. Black migrants were unwelcomed in Britain because their migration to Britain was seen as something that should be prevented and removed from Britain’s white society. Peter Taylor, a teenaged resident from Notting Hill, justified his participation in the Notting Hill by stating “It was the black foreigners who made the area a slum...could walk down the street and tell the houses where the black men lived”.⁵ Perceptions similar to Peter Taylor’s were persistent within the white community. Specifically, within the communities carrying the following attributes: individuals trying to find houses and individuals living in areas populated by West Indies. White Britons blamed black migrants for their terrible living standards and lack of job opportunity. Therefore, as more migrants entered Britain the tensions between the white British community and black migrant communities strengthened. This essay will examine how black migrants from the West Indies endured systematic unequal mistreatment due to the color of their skin during the 20th century. To do so this essay will discuss the white British attitudes towards the black community, anti-black and fascist groups, and government officials.

Family was an institution used to influence younger generations of white Britons to keep negative perspectives towards the black community alive. Jean Maggs, a British citizen from the 1950s, was pressured from her dad to not date a black man describing, “It was our parents who

⁴ Porter, London: A Social History, 355.

⁵ Edward Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 90.

drummed it into us so we hated the blacks. They said they had come to take our jobs and homes... I was more frightened, I think, than prejudiced".⁶ Parents who held such beliefs habitually passed their beliefs onto their children. Many parents from this time period believed blacks were inferior and deserved to be exploited. Children were influenced to think like their parents, causing the attitudes to persist through generations and heighten through books published magnifying such thoughts. When black migrants first arrived in Britain they received unwelcoming attitudes from the whites. With no information about the blacks, the whites who had never seen or interacted with black migrants, latched onto the easiest and most accessible information held about them. A majority of the young whites during the 20th century in Britain were ignorant and produced uninformed prejudices against black migrants due to their upbringing and the portrayal they received through books. Many of the books published during this time, especially children books, were used as a way to influence and keep racial stereotypes and attitudes towards black migrants existent within the white community. A well-known book, *Ten Little Nigger*, written by author Agatha Christie was released during the 1940s as a children's nursery rhyme.⁷ This children's book did not end with a 'happily ever after' for the blacks, as it ends with the wiping out of all the black children in the story. Many of the books, similar to *Ten Little Nigger*, portrayed the whites as being superior to the blacks. As depicted in the book this rhyme, "Ten little nigger boys went out to dine; One choked his little self, and then there were nine (see Fig. 1)," begins with ten black boys and ends with the death off all of them; each of them dying a different way.⁸ Black migrants

⁶ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 94.

⁷ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 87.

⁸ Full nursery rhyme written by Agatha Christine goes as followed: Ten little nigger boys went out to dine; One choked his little self, and then there were nine. Nine little nigger boys sat up very late; One overslept himself, and then there were eight. Eight little nigger boys traveling in Devon; One said he'd stay there, and then there were seven. Seven little nigger boys chopping up sticks; One chopped himself in half, and then there were six. Six little nigger boys playing with a hive; A bumble-bee stung one, and then there were five. Five little nigger boys going in for law; One got in chancery, and then there were four. Four little nigger boys going out to sea; A red herring swallowed one, and then there were three. Three little nigger boys walking in the zoo; A big

were seen as something that should be removed from the white British society. Such books influenced children to believe and follow the perceptions portrayed in the books. Books labeled the black community before the younger white community could. Stereotypes and opinions on the black community remained prominent within the white communities because of the presence of children books that were passed on through generations.

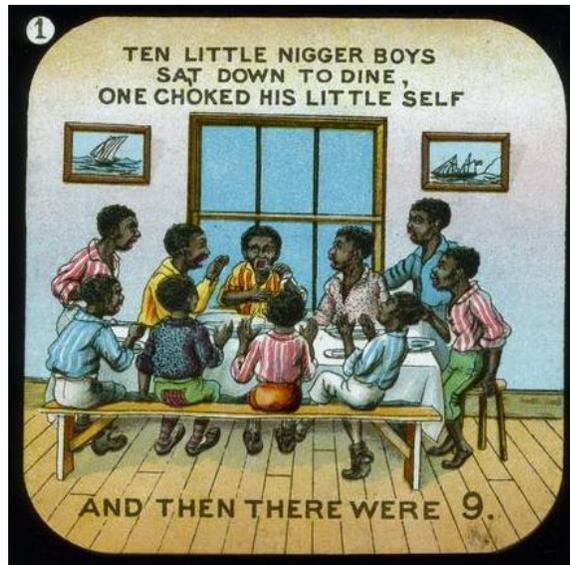


Fig. 1: A page taken from *Ten Little Nigger*, a children's book written by Agatha Christine showing ten dark-skinned boys sitting at a table with the central boy choking. Taken From: "Ten Little Nigger Boys." Museums Victoria Collections, collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/1475175.

During the late 1950s, stereotypes started to develop to justify how black migrants were treated. At the time, the white community labeled black migrants as being naturally lazy and inferior. For example, Mr. Sparks, a white British publican, clearly showed signs of prejudices and favoritism to the white community within his establishment: "when I decided not to serve drinks to colored people, I wrote to the brewery – Courages – and told them what I was doing. They told me that I was licensee and that I was responsible for the way I ran the pub" and he then goes on to

bear hugged one, and then there were two. Two little nigger boys sitting in the sun; One got frizzled up, and then there was one. One little nigger boy living all alone; He got married, and then there were none.

further his prejudices towards the migrants by saying, “After all, our regular customers were here before the colored people came. We have to consider them first”.⁹ Attitudes similar to Mr. Sparks were standard within the elder white community because the elder white community felt their opinions were justified in preferring ‘the whites’.

The presence mass influx of black migrants in Britain shined a light on problems that had already existed. Black migrants entering Britain were not to blame for the shortage of housing or lack of jobs, but white Britons chose to blame black migrants anyway. This is because, it was easier to blame the black population for the problems that were already occurring instead of trying to find the underlying problem within Britain. A common belief the white community held towards the black community was, “they’ve come to take our jobs and they’ve come to take our homes”.¹⁰ Blaming the migrants suggested that Britain had solved its housing problem, which had started after the passing of the British Nationality Act. It was easier for the white community to blame black migrants rather than the community as a whole, due to the negative views and perspectives the white community had already formulated against black migrants. Blaming black migrants instead of trying to reform the society Britons were living in led to the housing crisis worsening. The housing crisis within London was the cause of a great frustration for the both the white and black community. When white inhabitants of Notting Hill saw that the whites were being forced out and blacks were moving in, the white community blamed the blacks for such change. Blaming the blacks for their problems became easier due to the shift in demographics within Notting Hill. The whites living in Notting hill were blaming the West Indies when “In reality, the landowners were orchestrating the change in demographics as a way to profit from the blacks because they

⁹ Bloom, *Violent London; 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 402.

¹⁰ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 87.

knew they could extract higher rent from them”, the black migrants.¹¹ Violence and hostility made it very difficult for black migrants to live. Black migrants had difficulty finding houses to rent and employment. Black migrants were the first to lose their jobs when unemployment rose in 1956. Pilkington, the author of *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, stated “In 1958 over 8% of black people in Britain lost jobs compared to that of the 2% of white who had lost their jobs”.¹² Much of the black migrants were ridiculed by the white community because of their employment status. The employment opportunities that the blacks received were positions of low paying and unwanted jobs. A poll conducted amongst the whites living in Notting Hill in the late 1950s expressed attitudes whites had against blacks: “blacks should not be allowed to compete for equal jobs 37% and blacks should not enter housing list on the same conditions as whites 54%”.¹³ The poll conducted further supported the viewpoint white Britons held towards black migrants. Black migrants were thought of as workers who could work hard but whose place was at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The strong emotions white Britons held towards the housing crisis and lack of employment led to violence.¹⁴

The 1950s was a period of when anti-blacks and fascist groups were becoming popular within the white British community. The Teddy Boys, a group of young white boys that targeted the black migrants, emerged from poor neighborhoods in Britain; specifically in Elephant and Castle. The Teddy boys destroyed homes owned by black migrant families by smashing windows and throwing rocks at their doors. The Teddy Boys would attack the families of black migrants; shouting and beating the migrants in the streets to provoke and get a reaction out of the migrants.

¹¹ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 87.

¹² Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 89.

¹³ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 92.

¹⁴ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 88-90.

One of the Teddy Boy members stated, “One time six of us went to get one of the blacks; I didn’t know what he’d done but anyways he was a Spade. We just don’t care”.¹⁵ This quote demonstrates the Teddy boys’ groundless actions, nonchalant attitude and indifferent tone. The Teddy Boys were proud of what they were doing to black migrants; they did not care about the people they were hurting. The members of this organization believed they were safe from incarceration because policemen held the same prejudices.

A black woman living in West London in 1954 during the times leading up to the Notting Hill riot which started in 1958 said, “My husband was so scared as soon as he came in he hid in the bed, nobody would get him out... There were riots on, our lives were in danger, they were getting at us and we had to be really careful”.¹⁶ This further describes the constant fear black migrants were living in. The fear of being attacked by anti-black organization led to the blacks walking together in gangs because it became very dangerous for them to walk by themselves.

There were many fascist groups during the 1950s but the most influential group was the Oswald Mosley’s Union Movement. The Oswald Mosley’s Union Movement targeted the black migrants living in Britain during the Notting Hill riots. Their tactic was to spread destructive and toxic racism to the white community through local pubs in Notting Hill. Oswald Mosely became an influential leader for anti-black extremism and anti-immigration in the 1950s. Mosely was a product of the 1930-1950s and his extreme right-winged beliefs caused catastrophe to run through the streets of Notting Hill. Mosely had small but germinate followers in his movement. He was known as a big noise maker within the white community of Notting Hill, rallying and starting up trouble.¹⁷ White Britons within the community trusted Mosely and his movement, thus causing the

¹⁵ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 95-96.

¹⁶ Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 378.

¹⁷ A. N. Wilson, *London: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 123-125.

white community within Notting Hill to follow his organization and spread their negative thoughts on the black community. Oswald Mosley, the leader of this movement said, “we want an end to the thing which causes the color bar: immigration of thousands of completely different people who take our homes and threaten our jobs”.¹⁸ The white community’s trust in Mosley led to many of their opinions and views on the black migrants becoming more heightened and fortified. This group, like many other fascist ones, did not create racial hatred against the blacks but instead fueled, spread, and encouraged such behaviors.

The West Indies who migrated were almost always at risk and living in fear because of organizations like the Teddy Boys and Oswald Mosley’s Union Movement. The ultimate goal of these anti-black organizations was to terrorize the black community into leaving. The Teddy Boys and the Oswald Mosley’s Union Movement tried to achieve this goal by intensifying racial hatred and by committing crimes against them. These goals were achieved by fueling street violence and toying with the fears of the white community; unemployment and overcrowding. The riots that broke out in Notting Hill, West London in 1958 were manufactured by white British racist groups, their followers, and locals. Assisting in the final outbreak of the Notting Hill racial riots.¹⁹

Immigration officers were one of the many tools that the government used to limit Black immigration. Immigration officers were used as one of the many agents of the government committed to keeping blacks out of Britain. Londoners used the race riots as an excuse to blame black migrants and suggest that the white community was being threatened by black migrants and needed protection from the entry of black migrants. The first contact that black migrants had with the British was through immigration officers whose “job was simply keeping out black

¹⁸ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 99.

¹⁹ Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 380.

immigrants”.²⁰ Many Americans or Australians trying to get into Britain would go through immigration without questioning or having their passport thoroughly checked, but when black migrants were trying to get into Britain they had to prove that they were entitled to enter. An ex-immigration officer during the 1970s was told by his commanding officer that, “If you don’t show a good record in refusing people it is as though you are not doing your job right”.²¹ Such attitudes and ideas were commonly held mindsets amongst immigration officers. Abiding to the beliefs of the commanding officers was part of the job for immigration officers and the actions immigration officers took could not be questioned. The actions were not questioned because refusing entry to black migrants was deemed justifiable and was supported by the 1962 Commonwealth Act. This mindset labeled the black immigrants as a problem and the repercussions of this connotation lead to the denial and refusal of many black migrants. Immigration officers acted on the following assumptions, “all black Commonwealth visitors are immigrants”, and their “passports are probably forged”.²² The immigration officers wanted to remove the blacks from the British society and these assumptions and job orders helped them to achieve this goal.

The unequal treatment of the blacks is shown through the story of Miss Khan, a black migrant rejected from entering Britain. In June of 1973 Miss Khan had arrived at Gatwick airport with the proper documents, including an entry certificate that had been issued to her. She was coming to London to take a fulltime hairdressing course; the immigration officer thought otherwise. With no evidence the officer claimed that Miss Khan’s intension was not to go to school and refused Miss Khan’s entry into the country. The story of Miss Khan showed how if an office really wanted to keep someone from coming in, they had the power to by pressuring and questing

²⁰ Robert Samuel Moore, *Racism and Black Resistance in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 40.

²¹ Moore, *Racism and Black Resistance in Britain*, 39.

²² Moore, *Racism and Black Resistance in Britain*, 42.

the migrants extensively so that the migrants wouldn't be allowed in. The immigration officers would do this until the story the migrants were saying did not match or until the migrants found a reason to return them back to their hometown. There are many stories like the one of Miss Khan, where black immigrants with all the appropriate documents would be refused entry based on assumptions made from the immigration officers. Black migrants journeying to Britain who had mandatory documents, entry certificate or a marriage certificated were not guaranteed entry while most other migrates with just one of these would be sufficient enough to let them in without questioning. Due to the many ignorant and idiotic reasons the officers gave the black migrants, Commonwealth citizens, many of them were denied entry into Britain.²³

The treatment the police officers gave to black migrants within Britain was not any better or different than how immigration officers treated them. Police raids of clubs, restaurants, local shops and cafes where black people gathered was common throughout the mid to late 1900s. The 1980s was full of confrontation between the police and black community members, and the use of weapons against the West Indies became one of the main causes to the disturbances between both groups. These conflicts, occurring more often in poor communities like Brixton and Notting Hill, resulted in the West Indies feeling frustrated. The black migrants were frustrated at the lack of jobs and social lives, and the general attitude that the policemen had towards them. Policemen would wrongly accuse black people for crimes, rarely ever give them justice for the crimes committed against, were regularly targeted, and were even subjected to police brutality.²⁴ Police brutality was a growing concern for the black community due to the growing number of suspicious deaths while under the watch of policemen in custody or jail. In addition, "firebombing, window smashing,

²³ Moore, Racism and Black Resistance in Britain, 44-45.

²⁴ Bloom, Violent London; 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts, 389-392.

name calling, beating and harassment”, were some of the weapons used and methods taken to remove and scare black immigrants from Britain.²⁵

One of the many cases of violent disturbances against the black community occurred at a party on January 3, 1971. A group of white boys and girls attacked the black people using firebombs resulting in twenty-two people being badly injured, requiring hospitalization. Out of the entire group that attacked the party only two white were arrested. The press ignored this act of violence by keeping it from the public; revealing that the public refused to shine a light on the brutality and ignorance of the British police force.²⁶ This case demonstrates the reason behind the growing sense of injustice felt by the black community; an injustice that was completely ignored and disregarded. These attacks against the black community were brutal efforts made to keep the black people oppressed and segregated from the white people. As for the concern of police brutality against the blacks, many of their greatest fears did not just come from getting arrested but from being killed while in custody. A young black man said, “I was almost convicted, when I was arranged to spend several days with the police..., thought I was about to enter a lion’s den”.²⁷ This quotes depicts the fear and hostility the West Indies felt when around the police. The West Indies pictured being in custody with a policeman as a dangerous and threatening place. For Sir Kenneth Newman, Commissioner of the Metropolitan police from 1983-1987, the West Indies were another group to be identified as “the enemy within”.²⁸ If the commissioner of the police had this mindset about the black migrants, the police officers that worked below him would inevitably follow. The policemen’s job is to follow him and if the people in charge are denying any racial tension and

²⁵ Bloom, *Violent London; 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 387.

²⁶ Bloom, *Violent London; 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 423.

²⁷ Bloom, *Violent London; 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 391.

²⁸ Bloom, *Violent London; 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 424.

labeling the black community as ‘the enemies’ then the policemen committing unfair practices are being protected.

During 1980s Britain, many marches and protests, led by black community members and activists, were taking place due to police indifference on racial attacks and police brutality towards black people. A black activist in 1983 said, “When black people protest against the type of policing they are being subjected to, they come into conflict with the very same structures of policing that led to their protest in the first place”.²⁹ The actions of black community members standing up for their basic rights in the form of protests were manipulated into something else and taken as violent tactics against the police. The marches and protests, led by black activists, were intended to show the public that they, the West Indies, refused to be targeted by the polices’ indifference towards racial attacks. The West Indies want for change within the black community only led to a never-ending cycle of conflict between the police and the blacks. A case that highlights the unequal treatment of the blacks in relation to the police is the famous case of Stephen Lawrence; an eighteen-year-old boy who was killed in April of 1993 by a gang of white British boys. Stephen was an innocent black man whose life was taken away when he was stabbed and left for death. Stephens story became well-known due to police mal practice and corrupt judicial procedures. The police ignored witness and contaminated the scene of the crime and no one was prosecuted for the murder of Stephen Lawrence murder. The white suspects who were let free flaunted their immunity. Stories like the one of Stephen, who never got justice, perpetuated the ongoing conflict and tension between the police and the blacks due to the polices’ inability to do their job properly and justly.³⁰

²⁹ Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*, 424

³⁰ Wilson, *London: A History*, 174.

The history of Britain is a story of migration. Mass migration has undoubtedly changed London because the immigrants created and heightening problems within the country; some of which had existed way before the migrants arrived. Racial tensions and prejudices against the blacks were at its peak throughout the 1960s and 1970s because of poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, and the constant battles between the blacks and the police. In 20th century Britain, black people were constantly being exposed to violence that were perpetrated by local youths, the Teddy Boys, and right-wing organizations such as the Oswald Mosley's Union Movement. Because of groups like these, black men were being murdered and attacked for no other reason than the fact that they were black. Racism and prejudice views on the black community were present within the community's attitudes and upbringing of the children and youth. Since birth, the whites were taught that they were better than the blacks, that they were 'superior'. The white British knew nothing about these immigrants when they started arriving in Britain. The whites learned about these 'strangers' through books, like *Ten Little Niggers*, which depicted the Black community as being naturally lazy and dirty. The newspaper articles and books that came out during this century were published to evoke fear and anger throughout the white community directed towards the black migrants. These views on the Blacks were some of the reasons as to why they were refused housing accommodations and working positions, causing a chain reaction of events. These very influential organizations were vehicles used to spread anti-black sentiments among the white working class communities. All these organizations were allowed to openly say their prejudice opinions about the blacks without fear of legal consequences due to the, "inherit weakness of the laws during the 1950s".³¹ During this era, the, "police were actually in conflict with the black community, and like the immigration officer the policemen also saw himself in the

³¹ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots*, 99.

front line of defense against the blacks”.³² Defining the black man as a public enemy significantly influenced the attitudes and actions policemen and immigration officers took against black people. The common people of Britain, anti-black organizations, and government officials all played a part in shaping what the black community throughout the 20th century had to endure. The actions, attitudes, and prejudice view of the white Britons demonstrate that there was systematic unequal treatment and racial violence against the black community. London during the 20th century exhibited all sorts of manifestations of structural racism and this problem was illustrated through the extent of all of the different fascists. The racial mistreatment towards the blacks took place in various forms; some of which included government departments, local businesses, white Britons organizations, and the police. All these circumstances support how the blacks from the West Indies were treated less favorably than the whites and how this black community was at a disadvantage because of their race.

³² Moore, *Racism and Black Resistance in Britain*, 59.

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