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Mapping Black Mixed-Race Birmingham: place, locality and identity

Introduction

This article brings place into the analytical frameworks of Critical Mixed-Race Studies by critically examining how the local spatial locations of Black mixed-race[i] subjects shape their racial sense of self. I examine what drives affective connections to their localities, what makes them feel at home or out of place, and ask what these insights can reveal about personal racial identification choices, perceptions of difference and affiliations with others. In addition to capturing ones sense of place, I examine which aspects of the built environment have shaped their 'urban movement repertoires' and featured within their personal maps of the city overtime (Noxolo, 2018: 802). Too often place is relegated in empirical research on mixedness, featuring as a side note in the findings section without a developed discussion of how or why this variable has significant implications for identity outcomes (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Song, 2010b; Song & Aspinall, 2012; Tizard & Phoenix, 1993). Rather than treat place as 'a backdrop for social relations', I argue that 'it forms an integral part of people's identities' (Lewis, 2016: 920). The article shows how place shapes the ways in which mixed-race identifications are negotiated and cultivated and provides an alternative contextual analysis of mixedness that goes beyond individualist approaches that centre the personal micro-politics of mixed-race experiences.

Currently, when place is evoked in mixed-race studies it is often in relation to debates about racial heritage, lineage and ancestral homelands. Beyond that, place features in analyses relating to national contextual effects on the production of mixed-race identities (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; King-O'Riain et al., 2014; Thompson, 2012). This application of place has been particularly useful in developing an understanding of why a Black mixed-race person in the USA might regularly be read as Black, in the Caribbean as distinctly 'brown', and in Zambia as 'coloured' (Khanna, 2010; Mohammed, 2000; Milner-Thorton, 2014). Although these nation-state analyses of

mixedness are critical to the development of transnational understandings about the global diversity of the mixed-race experience, this analytical lens is too wide to capture the significance of localized identifications and connections. Throughout the article I make the case for examining the multiple scales of belonging that exist beyond national identifications by considering how regional and local geographies shape experiences of place and race (Mahtani 2014: 48). I explore how mixed-race people engage with, and draw from, their *immediate* environments to understand and construct their racial identities. In doing so I show how mixed-race people come to be spatially, as well as racially labelled.

I apply multiple meanings of place to the analysis in order to capture the multifaceted ways that it operates in the mixed-race articulations of the self that I present. A central question for the article asks what factors have influenced mixed-race *roots* within the city and how personal ideas about territory, difference and belonging have shaped their individual *routes* through it. I show how a 'Black sense of place' can help us to understand how participants' affective relations to places in the city are formed (McKittrick 2011). In addition, I consider how remembering is central to place-making and identification processes by tracing the participants' personal memories of the city and examining how they intersect with the social histories of migration, de-industrialisation, racism and resistance that have characterized Birmingham overtime. Whilst memory is an important thread through the data, I also explore how the materiality of the city has had a bearing on patterns of mixed-race settlement and movement. For example, I show how the architecture of the city, whether created through racist housing policies, city planning or war-time bombing, has shaped *where* the possibilities for racial mixing in Birmingham have occurred. By presenting this contextual detail I show some of the social forces which have brought different people together in particular neighbourhoods at particular times and consider how this can shape the ways people racialise themselves and others at the local level. To that end, I understand place as networked relationships of people, and an inherently relational process. By drawing on these multiple approaches in the analysis, I suggest that place operates as a temporal archive of memory and materiality that is regularly drawn on in mixed-race lives to articulate their racialized identities.

Birmingham, which has at different historical junctures become ‘a testing ground for national responses to difference’ (Wilson 2015: 586), provides a rich and distinct city-lens through which to critically examine how mixed identities materialise over time within the multiculture of a post-industrial, postcolonial city (Noxolo 2018: 805). The demographics of the city, including its sizeable Mixed White and Black Caribbean population comparative to the UK’s other major cities, also make it a fitting location and unique vantage point for the upcoming analysis. By bringing the spatial stories of Birmingham’s mixed-race population into focus, the article expands upon Britain’s historical narrative of mixed-race. It situates participants’ identities within the thick material context of the city to critically account for the different scales of belonging that mixed-race people experience as city-dwellers who live, socialise and identify through their respective neighbourhood locations. Through this in-depth analysis of how mixed-race identity intersects with place, the article unpacks an important, often unaccounted for, layer of mixed-race subjectivity.

Introducing Birmingham

Birmingham has the second largest mixed population in the UK after London. Nevertheless, a large proportion of contemporary empirical studies on mixedness have been situated within the ‘superdiversity’ of the capital city and nearby regions in the south-east (Ali, 2003; Song & Aspinall, 2012; Song 2010a; Song & Gutierrez, 2015; Tizard & Phoenix, 1993). Census data indicates that regional variations in mixed-race populations across the UK are quite stark which warrants further analysis. For example, analysis of 2001 census data has shown that in the ‘top quartile of all the wards with thirty or more White/Black Caribbean families’, 37.3% of those are located in the West Midlands, and Birmingham in particular (Smith, Edwards, & Caballero, 2011: 1466). The Mixed White and Black Caribbean group are also the largest of all the mixed ethnic groups in Birmingham by a significant margin. As of the 2011 census they make up just over half (52%) of the mixed population in the city, compared to London where they constitute 29% of the capital’s mixed ethnic population. The multiculture in places like London can also produce a context in which being mixed is ‘not particularly unusual’ and

in some neighbourhoods, even perceived as the norm (Song, 2010a: 280). Evidently, closer explorations of how demographic variations of mixedness in Britain can materialize on the ground to influence localized conceptualizations of mixedness are necessary. How, for instance, might the large Mixed White and Black Caribbean population in Birmingham have implications for how mixed-race identity and *mixing* are conceptualized in the city as a mostly *Black Caribbean* and *white* phenomenon?

Race-making in the city

Despite the sizeable and distinct make-up of the mixed-race population in Birmingham, it is not a city that signifies mixed-race in the same way that port cities such as Cardiff and Liverpool have done overtime. Although Black presence and interraciality in Britain can be traced 'at least as far back as the Tudor era', it was from the nineteenth century when mixing emerged as an increasing social practice within a number of port-city communities (Caballero 2019: 1). Birmingham in comparison, experienced visible changes in the demographic of its population more acutely a little later, following the mass migration of colonial citizens to the city after WWII. Given the extensive automotive production industry during that time, the period has been referred to as Birmingham and the West Midland's economic heyday. Barber & Hall (2008, 3) note that, 'between 1951 and 1966, total employment in the region increased by 14%, compared to 8.5% nationally'. Consequently, Birmingham's historical narrative of race has often been written around the so-called 'race-relations' between the white 'host society' and the Black and brown 'new arrivals' during that period (Rex & Moore, 1967; Rex & Tomlinson, 1979). The city, and particularly areas of immigrant settlement like Handsworth and Sparkbrook, would become 'central to the formation of 'white' British sociological canons on race-relations' (Palmer 2020: 92). Interethnic conflict in relation to housing in the city constituted a large part of this analyses. Whilst residents in Birmingham, immigrant or otherwise, enjoyed high levels of employment, competition and discrimination over housing was rife (Rex & Moore, 1967).

Due to its 'strategic significance as a crucible for engineering and vehicle manufacturing', Birmingham suffered extensive bombing throughout WWII (Adams, 2011: 242). Since the 1930s, the city had been planning slum clearance programmes to

demolish the old, unhealthy, dangerous housing that stood near the city centre (Chinn, 2015; Jones, 2004, 2008). The ‘aerial bombardment’ suffered during the war 'provided another stimulus for thinking about reconstruction’ of the city (Jones 2004: 369). The city council’s reconstruction plans for the post-war period involved extensive ‘slum clearances’ of the war-torn and dilapidated ‘older red-brick terraced housing’ in the inner-parts of the city, with much of this housing stock to be replaced with new council properties on the periphery of the city through the 1960s (Moore 2011: 5). Due to discriminatory housing policies, these new dwellings were largely denied to ‘coloured’ immigrants (Rex & Moore, 1967). With limited access to new housing provisions on the outskirts of the city, (the mostly male) migrants sought housing that was ‘held by the city council for demolition or others that had not yet been designated for slum clearance’ that were cheap to rent, in neighbourhoods near the city centre like Balsall Heath (Moore 2011: 5). Others looked to rent rooms in lodging houses located just outside the inner ring of terraced housing in areas such as Handsworth, Aston, Small Heath, Lozells and Sparkbrook. The forced clustering together of migrants would create the conditions for interethnic mixing with white residents in these localities.

These demographic developments in the city and its bordering boroughs and towns were not only the focus of seminal academic race-relations texts of the day. Both journalists and the government weighed in to contribute towards the cross-institutional white gaze that amplified a racialized narrative of the city to the nation that stigmatized and problematized the impact of its changing demographics (Palmer, 2020). A flashpoint moment in this history was the election of Conservative MP Peter Griffiths in Smethwick with the help of the circulating slogan, ‘If you want a Nigger for a Neighbour Vote Labour’ (Narayan, 2019). This received national coverage in 1964. The following year Malcolm X, on invitation by the Indian Workers Association, visited Marshall Street in Smethwick where white residents had been calling on the council to buy up the local housing and rent it to whites only (Narayan & Andrews, 2015). A few years later in 1968, the notorious Conservative MP Enoch Powell delivered his *Rivers of Blood* speech in a Birmingham city-centre hotel that would go on to shape immigration laws on a national scale (Hirsch, 2018). In the post-colonial (and increasingly post-industrial) period of the 1960s -1980s, ‘research, public debate and moral panic’ all combined to produce the

threat of an emergent 'urban problem' in the city (Tonkiss, 2005: 5). In the twenty-first century Birmingham has retained its unique place as a battleground for Britain's race politics and policies. The sizeable Muslim population in Sparkbrook, for example, has in recent times been vulnerable to the surveillance apparatus of the nation's so-called 'war-on-terror' (Hussain, 2014). Given that Birmingham holds such a significant place in Britain's historical narrative around race and racism, and has the second-largest mixed population in the country, it seems ironic that it has been neglected as a research location. This article responds to this glaring omission by writing Birmingham into Britain's historical and contemporary narratives of mixed-race identity. In doing so it expands existing knowledge about the geographical diversity of mixedness in Britain.

The city and subjectivity

Whilst at different periods the city has been upheld as a site of 'civic improvement' and 'cultural progress', these utopian readings have often existed in tension with prevailing dystopian analyses which frame the city as an urban landscape at risk of 'degeneracy… overrun by the 'dark' and 'dangerous' working classes or foreigners' (Amin & Thrift, 2002: 292). These tensions that exist 'between attraction and repulsion implicit in the various representations of city life' are an interesting framework for thinking through contemporary and historical ideas about mixed-race and mixing in Britain overtime (Keith, 2005: 28). Whilst on the one hand cities are coopted to represent the potential of the urban to create the conditions for a melting pot society whereby the significance of racial differences fade away – representations of the metropolis (and Birmingham in particular) as a site for racialized conflict, tension and transgression, also continue unabated (Hussain, 2014; Wilson, 2015). Mixed-race populations, who overwhelmingly reside in cities, are implicated in all of these competing representations of the urban. In recognition of this fact, I will closely examine how mixed-race subjects come to be *spatially* as well as *racially* labelled in the city and ask how their identities can be 'pinned down' in place (Tonkiss 2005: 45).

The city is used as the entry point into this discussion, rather than the overarching unit of analysis, so as not to obscure the 'diversity of ethnic experience' that exists within

contemporary cities (Amin & Thrift, 2002: 295). The forthcoming analysis mostly explores conceptualizations of locality and neighbourhood to lay bare how mixed-raced identity is articulated in different spaces across Birmingham. I consider how the aforementioned histories of migration and housing developments have shaped the formation of neighbourhoods and borders within the city and examine how these locations have been experienced by Black mixed-race residents. How, for example, might the typical signifiers attached to the social-spatial category of the inner-city including the racialized Other, messiness, deprivation and crime, come to mark the bodies and minds of Black mixed-race people who pass through, or are born into these places (Knowles, 2003)? Although urban design and planning goes some way in shaping the social zones and neighbourhoods that emerge within cities (Tonkiss 2005), *personal* perceptions of these spatial concepts cannot be neatly mapped onto wards and districts as they are in administrative data. De Certeau (1984) refers to the former objective reading of the urban landscape as the 'concept city', a vision of the metropolis as it might be seen from above in the mind's eye of 'the planner, the urbanist, or the master-builder' (Tonkiss 2005: 127). These models of neighbourhoods and places rarely match up to the lived experiences of those who reside within them (Catney & Frost, 2019: 2). Rather, one's view of the city depends partly 'on where you are standing and where you have come from', so each person's spatial story will be slightly different from the next (Tonkiss, 2005: 113). Furthermore, wherever you stand in a city, you rarely occupy that place as a lone actor but stand side by side with others.

In this view, a relational approach to understanding place as networked relationships of people and activity is crucial to recognizing how it gets bound up in expressions of racial identity and belonging (Pierce et al., 2011). In a similar vein, Massey's (2005) theorizations suggest that place should not be treated as a bounded concept but that which is fluid, non-static, with a significant temporal aspect. The temporal nature of place offers a crucial analytical framework for a historical study such as this. How, for instance, do the aforementioned histories of migration, planning and politics which have characterized Birmingham's racial story intersect with personal histories of the city? To put it another way, if we conceive of the city as an 'archive or repository for the past' that has built up overtime, how might elements of this be drawn

upon, resisted or reproduced in personal narratives of the self (Hetherington, 2013: 18)? As Massey (1993: 145) reminds us, people carry around with them particular feelings about places and the 'sense of place' they develop is a distinctly personal process, shaped by gender, social class, generation and race. An important reflection for this study is how these individualised feelings about places can come up against (spatial) expressions of state power which, as we have seen in the case of Birmingham, have oftentimes represented the city (and its racialized minority residents) in an unfavorable light. In this sense, it is important to recognise how the meaning of place and identity, can at times become a 'discursive struggle', manifesting in 'socio-spatial' conflicts between external representations and internal identifications (Nayak, 2011: 553).

Keeping this in mind, a 'Black sense of place' can be read alongside Massey's 'sense of place', to help explore how Black (mixed-race) geographies have taken shape within the postcolonial, post-industrial urban landscape that has characterized Birmingham overtime (Noxolo, 2018). A Black sense of place 'draws attention to the longstanding links between blackness and geography', emphasising that racism has always been a spatial project (McKittrick, 2011: 947). Whether related to struggles around forced migration, dispossession of land, exclusion or segregation – place profoundly shapes the Black experience. Thus, a Black sense of place can often be shaped by unequal relations of power that exist within the places where Black people reside. That said, although struggle is a key feature of Black geographies, it does not define them and a Black sense of place can also help us to examine how spaces are owned, imagined, mapped and reproduced by Black people in response to structural conditions, in a way that works to 'sustain and valorize black lives' (Allen, Lawhon, & Pierce, 2019: 1012). In other words, I also want to showcase how Black mixed-race people can produce space for themselves, *in spite of* the 'deliberate attempts to destroy a Black sense of place' (McKittrick, 2011: 947).

Methods

The findings draw on thirty-seven in-depth semi-structured life history interviews with Black mixed-race people ranged in age from 20 to 56 years old (Campion, 2017). Ethics

approval was granted before entering the field and a fixed purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants into three birth cohorts in order to capture the specificity of their social-generational locations (Bryman 2016). These were as follows; (1)1955–1969 (2) 1970–1979 (3) 1980–1995.[ii] Recruitment posters were distributed across the city in various locations including; online neighbourhood Facebook pages, Black hairdressers, barbershops and arts, leisure and community centres. Informal networks were also used to generate participation and some snowball sampling to bolster the recruitment of men to the 60s and 70s-born cohorts. All participants came of age in Birmingham and were born in the city, except two who moved in as teenagers. Just over half of those born in the city had never lived elsewhere. Most had lived in different areas in the city throughout their lives but for the purpose of the study they were prompted to speak about their childhood neighbourhoods to foreground their coming of age stories.

The sample was relatively evenly split by gender, with nineteen women and eighteen men participating. The majority of participants came from traditional working-class backgrounds (using parents' occupations) and one third grew up in social housing. Just over half the sample had university degrees, the majority of those were from the 80s-born cohort. Given that qualitative studies on mixedness often report high proportions of middle class participants, this balanced sample by class was a desirable outcome (Edwards et al., 2010; Song & Aspinall, 2012; Tizard & Phoenix, 1993)**.** All interviews were opened with the same questions that asked where respondents and their parents were born and which areas they had lived in overtime. Participants were asked how important their neighbourhood was to their overall identity, what significant social networks they had where they grew up, which social institutions they frequented, the type of housing they lived in, and their perceptions of the ethnic diversity of their areas. The sample was drawn from a range of neighbourhoods in the city including; Handsworth, Lee Bank, Sparkbrook, Moseley, Balsall Heath, Ladywood, Selly Oak, Hockley, Aston, Northfield, Chelmsley Wood, Small Heath, and Nechells. Therefore, the data generated allows for a comprehensive analysis of the plethora of mixed-race identities across the city. All interview recordings were transcribed and recurrent themes were coded using QSR International's NVivo 10 Software. In part, the analysis was a deductive process insofar as I set out to capture how abstract and material concepts of place featured within

participants' references to neighbourhood and the city more broadly. However, beyond that initial framework, the approach to coding sub-themes under those main topics of focus was inductive. This involved looking out for patterns and similarities across the data and instances of difference across neighbourhood narratives.

Findings

Neighbourhood, community capital and memory

The 60s and 70s-born participants in the study tended to express the strongest feelings of nostalgia when describing childhood memories about their areas. Neighbourhoods were frequently described as 'close' and 'tight-knit' communities. Born in the early-1970s, Malcolm grew up in the working-class multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Sparkbrook, an area made famous by Rex and Moore's seminal text *Race, Community and Conflict* in 1967. The 2011 census indicates the continuation of a sizeable Black and brown presence – in the area 'almost 90 per cent are of minority ethnic background' (Hussain, 2014: 621). Malcolm and his siblings grew up in a single parent household, headed by his white mother. Below he remembers the large non-relational kinship networks in the area that functioned as her informal support.

> Everyone was in everyone's houses, if I came home from school at lunchtime and mom was at work, I could go down the road to aunty Elaine and […] have a little food there and I could go to aunty Andrea… do you know what I mean, it was that kind of… everyone's your aunty or your mom or whichever […] in the very early 80s it *really* was like that.

Community closeness is presented as a factual characteristic of the early 1980s here and Malcolm's reliance on 'intra-household exchanges' resonates with historical literature that suggests 'kinship networks lay at the heart of the working-class community' (Lewis, 2016: 915). Malcolm later went on to say, 'my mom as a young white girl and her own experiences of her own family, had far more affinity with the Black community, she'd had far more love from them, far more support from them'. He told me that his mother

organically developed skills through these relationships, such as learning to cook Caribbean food. These insights are indicative of the unique forms of mixed sociability and creolization that can take place within and across multiethnic working-class communities and families at the local level (Bauer, 2010). They also shed light on how Caribbean relations to kinship are shaped by complex transnational histories of movement, dispersal and migration, that have given rise to expansive, adaptive and intergenerational notions of the 'family' that can include non-relational kin in caring and childrearing practices (Chamberlain, 2003).

Many others from the older cohorts' expressed similar romantic memories of the yesteryears that emphasized notions of 'rootedness, localism and collectivity' (Mirza & Reay 2000: 530), often showing appreciation for the simple pleasures of their youth. Diane, 52, grew up in Balsall Heath, one of the inner-city areas designated for slum clearance that was known for being the city's 'red light district' up until the 1990s (Hubbard, 1998). Despite the area's reputation, Diane had fond memories of Balsall Heath and described how the 'sun shone everyday' during her six weeks school holidays in the early 1970s. She also had a vague memory of playing in the neighbourhood 'bomb pecks.'[iii]

> I keep seeing this little girl and she's playing on […] a bomb peck […] lots of buildings weren't quite built […] I reckon that that was to do with the war and things not being redeveloped as quickly as we might […] now.

Others from the 60s-born cohort described playing in 'bomb pecks,' the legacy of heavy war-time bombing the city had suffered. Therefore, Diane's depictions of a bleak and brutally neglected bombed out neighbourhood is a distinctly Birmingham post-war landscape. Descriptions of these neglected war-torn sites provide great insight into the 'architecture that formed [their] movements repertoires' as children and young people during the period (Noxolo, 2018: 806). To the city planners, the derelict landscape that characterized parts of neighbourhoods like Balsall Heath were urban ruins but for young people like Diane, they were adventure playgrounds. Participants' personal memories of the city and their local areas also provided in-depth insight to the urban changes, class

transformations, and de-industrialization of the city that has occurred since the late 1960s (Barber & Hall, 2008). Below, Jenny (53) spoke fondly about growing up in her inner-city area, Witton.

> I remember a lot about Witton […] we lived in a maisonette […] I remember like we used to play out *every day*, like not nowadays where lots of children are indoors […] Lots of great ball games […] I remember we used to play on my roller-skates […] there was a café over the road on the corner that was always busy because around that area was very industrial, so you had a lot of factories and the workers yeah. And you very much knew quite a few people on that street […] over the road was the factory where my mom worked, where she did her cleaning […] there was about a couple of black families […] it was just pure white then.

In Jenny's account, capital emerges as the dominant force that shaped the daily rhythm of Witton life (Lefebvre, 2004). The lifeworlds of the local families came to be formulated within and around the sociality that the factories produced. The rhythm of her street can be associated with the 'economic growth' in the area at that time (Hetherington, 2013: 23).

Racist presence on the streets and within neighbourhoods tended to feature more prominently in the narratives of the 60s and 70s-born cohorts than those from the 80s-born group. The 'decolonial churn' that pulled the city's Black, white and brown youth populations into a multi-ethnic 'urban vortex' in the 1970s and 1980s could sometimes be fraught with racialised tensions (Noxolo, 2018). Bradley (40), described growing up in Selly Oak in the south of the city in the 1980s. The neighbourhood surrounds the University of Birmingham, pulling in a global community of students from around the world and other parts of the UK. Bradley explained; 'it was very different back then… it's very different now. Students… bars and… it never used to be like that, it used to all shops and skinheads'. This generation of 1980s 'skinheads' that Bradley describes depicts a particular moment in time when this masculine white working-class stylisation and subculture 'converged with neofascist politics' (Back, 2000: 133). Bradley's

recollection of ‘shops and skinheads’ is also an interesting observation, insofar as it locates them as part of the materiality of the street, a static element of the Selly Oak landscape during his youth. He went on to say, ‘I remember my dad was around one time and like loads of skinheads were like stamping his car and that and kicking off. My mom used to get a lot of stick as well.’ In these examples we see how the nuances of a distinctly *mixed-race* Black sense of place in a white-majority neighbourhood is structured by everyday cartographies of racist violence. Simultaneously ‘British’, ‘Brummie’ and Black but with a white mom at home, coming of age at this time could be a complex negotiation of identity, belonging and difference within the socio-political contexts of 1970s and 1980s Britain.

As young people, the 60s and 70s-born cohorts were oftentimes confronted with the menacing face of white British racism on the streets, especially in white majority areas like Bradley’s, or city-centre zones where National Front marches could take place. Social institutions in local neighbourhoods, such as youth clubs and Black churches, were regularly referenced as significant spaces where ‘Black counterhegemonic circuits of knowledge’ could be nurtured and strengthened within communities in the face of external hostilities (Palmer, 2020: 98). The 60s and 70s-born cohorts spoke most frequently about their attendance at such places. Below, Lucien (50) describes lessons learned at his local youth club in the mid-1970s.

> There used to be a youth club […] on a Wednesday and it used to finish at about 9.30pm and I remember two of the youth leaders […] after the club we’d be outside on a summer evening and I remember them politicising us […] talking about Marcus Garvey but you know really explaining what Marcus Garvey was about and talking about […] self-determination and that we have […] to do twice as… three times or four times as good in school.

By age thirteen (circa 1977), Lucien explained that he had ‘discovered reggae music’. Birmingham’s prominent role in the production of a new generation of British reggae bands during this period should not be understated. Steel Pulse, formed in 1975, is

perhaps the most notable. The band 'fused an awareness of contemporary events in the black globality with a commentary on the things its members were experiencing directly in the Handsworth locale' (Connell, 2019: 107). Lucien talked fondly of particular artists, 'I remember the album by a guy called Tapper Zukie and he had a track on there about Steve Biko and it just opened up that inquisitive side of me'. By fifteen, he became drawn to one particular Birmingham sound system – Duke Alloy – a sound that Birmingham-born dub-poet icon Benjamin Zephaniah recalls 'toasting'[iv] with as a teenager (Zephaniah, 2019: 93). Lucien would follow them to shebeens and blues parties[v] all over the city. Originating in post-war Jamaica, Sound System culture travelled across the Black Atlantic as immigration increased during the 1950s, transporting politically conscious protest reggae music to the back gardens, local parks, and even churches of Birmingham (Connell, 2019; Henry, 2012). Lucien explained the significant role that Black churches played in hosting vibrant sound system[vi] clashes across the city.

> The church… played an important part in my adolescence […] they were places where we could go and play music and have sound clashes […] I mentioned some clubs earlier on, they're not clubs, they're church halls […] these places were […] were quite liberal and forward thinking, in terms of allowing that to happen on their premises […] and I think about the opposition that they must have experienced, those church leaders. I remember coming out of some of those dances and you'd have the Special Patrol vans outside.

Black mixed-race youth like Lucien found ways to create alternative maps and routes through the city, forming Black geographies that coexisted within and against the cartographies of structural and street-level racisms. Through attendance at his local youth club and consumption of Rastafari-inspired reggae music networks, Lucien was transported to the Black liberation struggles of the Caribbean and Africa. The 'segregated spaces of radical opposition' which he moved through (hooks 1995: 6), cultivated Black transnational dialogues and promoted access to alternative pedagogies from which he could receive lessons about racial identity, community, politics and resistance. From these examples, we see how a Black sense of place can be understood as a 'process of

materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination' (McKittrick 2011: 949).

The feelings of nostalgia expressed by some of the older participants *rooted* them in place, and in many ways can be understood as 'counter-memories' that speak back to some of the aforementioned representations of Birmingham, by unearthing an 'alternative perspective on its history' (Hetherington 2013: 28). This section has shown how attachments to place and relationships within neighbourhood and community spaces can be important sources of capital in Black mixed-race lives. In participants' narrations of place, we have seen how it can function as a site of refuge and can cultivate racialized identities. The following sections build on this, by turning to examine how identifications *through* place are made. That is, how place constitutes Black mixed-race identities and is used as a way to speak oneself into existence.

Place as Personhood

Most of the participants spoke of themselves using spatial references at some point in their interviews. Those who grew up in areas with long histories of ethnic minority settlement and large populations of people of colour, were most likely to express feelings of local patriotism when speaking about their neighbourhoods (Back, 2005). Patricia from the 70s-born cohort grew up in Handsworth but moved out as a young person. She told me, 'I consider myself to be a Handsworth girl, Handsworth until I die'. Handsworth was often a significant point of reference for respondents across the three cohorts, whether they had lived in the area or not. As noted, Birmingham has been central to national historical debates about race and the nation. Handsworth, in particular, has often been a focal point in these discussions. Palmer (2020: 91) notes that, 'during the 1970s and early 1980s […] Handsworth had taken on an iconic spatial status for the production of Black pathological narratives and 'common-sense' racist imagery concerning Black community deprivation and criminality.' It was central to a number of seminal texts that would constitute the burgeoning 'race relations' literature of the 1960s and has since secured its place within the British imaginary as a typical 'Black neighbourhood', or

‘ghetto’, characterized by ‘high indices of poverty… underachieving schools, large concentrations of social housing’ (Reynolds, 2013: 489).

Although Handsworth is a neighbourhood where Black culture has been berated and contested, it has been an important location from which it has been defended and celebrated. Nayak (2011, 553) reminds us that ‘places are assigned multiple and contested meanings by different people… and their status is always in a process of fraught negotiation’. In the case of Handsworth, negative representations of the area have in some sense provided the very conditions for it to emerge as a symbolic ‘counter-space’ in the city overtime (Lefebvre 1991). It has repeatedly been the front-line for major uprisings and holds a prominent position in the ‘urban topography of Britain’ (Knowles 2003: 90, 91), alongside its significant counterparts including Brixton in London, Toxteth in Liverpool and Moss Side in Manchester. As Palmer (2020:102) notes, ‘Handsworth was both a product and producer of a global Black consciousness that was distinct and powerful’. In that regard, one can imagine how a *collective* Black sense of place might develop from the overlapping histories of Black migration and resistance within the area to prompt a shared racial narrative and visualization of Handsworth as a ‘Black neighbourhood’ in the city. For example, whilst Ezra described it as the ‘Black capital’ of Birmingham, Assefa referred to Handsworth as ‘Rasta heaven’. In Maya’s description below, Handsworth comes across as a special place in Birmingham, for all of its disparate communities of colour.

> Handsworth has got this status amongst […] Black… and minority ethnic communities like, I guess, as a whole. Like… *everyone* can claim some kind of family or heritage there. But it’s like it makes it like almost authentic. Erm… and […] you come to know a lot of people […] I’ve known in Birmingham […] a lot of people come from Handsworth or have passed through Handsworth… or they wanna claim Handsworth. [Maya, 27]

Through her references to family and heritage, Maya invokes the idea of a local citizenship, authenticated through historical ancestral bloodlines in the area and signals the importance of intergenerational residency. In her subtle dismissal of those others who

‘wanna claim’ the neighbourhood, she discreetly distinguishes these long-standing Handsworth residents and communities from others who might not be ‘naturalized’ citizens of the area through birth or ancestry. Handsworth is articulated as a genealogical community whereby authentic citizenship cannot simply be granted through *jus soli*[vii].

Bradley (40), was privy to this conception of Handsworth authenticity. He moved to the area as a young teenager from Selly Oak, which he described as a ‘council estate… predominantly white, a few mixed families there… one or two mixed race boys… no full black people.’ In his early teenage years, he moved into what he described as, ‘a kind of hostel place’ in Handsworth. Reflecting on his time there, he explained that the basis of his connections to other Black and mixed-race young people in Handsworth were distinguishable from how he identified with his mixed-race friends in Selly Oak.

> There was a few people [in Handsworth] that was mixed as well but […] we didn’t kind of connect on the level that I connected with the other mixed people [in Selly Oak] because it was like we were all Black kind of thing […] it was just a different kind of allegiance do you know what I mean? […] you identify through […] the things that we were doing, rather than what we are […] and then it’s like how… how far do you wanna go […] because like the further you go, the more Blacker you was […] not necessarily the more Black you are but the more respect you got, do you know what I mean?

Bradley’s excerpt shows the extent to which ‘socio-spatial relationships […] link individuals together through a common place-frame’ (Pierce et al., 2011: 54). The Black sense of place he experiences in Handsworth is shaped by his networked positionality within the area vis-à-vis other Black and Black mixed-race people who collectively reproduce the place-frame which designates the neighbourhood as a ‘Black’ area in the city. As noted, Handsworth is an important archive of Black life in the city. Whether functioning as the frontline against police brutality or the epicenter of the city’s carnival, shared racialized understandings of Handsworth promotes homogeneity across disparate Black groups, over difference. The socio-economic conditions of the inner-city and the persistent racial symbolism that attaches itself to its Black working-class inhabitants also

seemed to compel Bradley to perform the code of the street. He performs toughness through his Black masculinity to gain respectability and his racialized identity is thus 'concretised in place' (Nayak 2011: 552). His experience of a collective Black identity in Handsworth was starkly different from the relations he had developed with other mixed-race people in Selly Oak, less than six miles away. In that context he constituted part of a mixed-race minority in the mostly white area and self-identified as such.

Although for the most part Bradley described 'feeling' Black in Handsworth and would often self-identify to others as such, his claims to a Black identity could sometimes be rejected by Black boys in the area on the basis that he originated from, what he described as, 'the white boy ends' of the city (Campion, 2019). He explained that often it was his local, rather than his mixed heritage, that could become the key dividing line within his Black friendships. Bradley's entrance to a Black group identity was therefore conditional and predicated on his ability to authentically claim a substantial connection to Handsworth and the inner-city more generally. In the last section of the findings I elaborate further on the significance of internal city borders. I pay close attention to how they are articulated by participants to carve up the city and utilized as a tool to draw lines around their racialized identities and distinguish themselves from others.

Internal borders

Neighbourhood identities were often made most clear when participants compared their localities with other areas and described their movements through the city into new territories. Chris (40), a friend of Bradley's, distinguished his experience of growing up in the inner-city area of Lee Bank from Bradley's upbringing in Selly Oak, an equivalently working class (but white) area located outside the inner-ring around the city. Although white areas in the outer-bands of the city have historically been the places where many racist attacks have occurred, the inner-city zones have been the sites where struggles against racisms have erupted. Below, Chris suggests that an acute and unique form of inner-city struggle materializes in these environments that non-White residents in the outer regions are shielded from.

> Bradley's lived a life where he's grew up predominantly in the south of the city. I can tell you, Bradley didn't grow up in a deprived area. He might have been in an outer-city deprived area but […] in an inner-city area it's different […] and I can hear it, when people talk, I can hear it (clicks fingers) straight away […] and I know that's where you're coming from.

Chris' personal cartography of Birmingham mirrors the Chicago School's conceptualizations of the modern city that sees its spatial organization 'in terms of a series of concentric rings' that expand outwards from the business centre, to the zones of transition (inner-city), towards the commuter zones (suburbs) (Burgess 1925). His perceptions of inner and outer-city ecologies are very distinct. He constructs the inner-city as the most genuine and significant site of struggle and gives 'social definition' to his locale through an 'active process of exclusion' (Massey 1995: 196). Chris makes an authentic claim to the inner-city by excluding Bradley from that space and from his experience, despite the fact they are both racialized as Black mixed-race and share a similar class background. In this excerpt, local identities take precedent which, according to Chris, are embodied and can quite literally be heard through accent. For Chris, Bradley is unable to perform the specific type of creolised speech forms that have historically been found to characterize multi-ethnic inner-city subjectivities (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). In addition to perceptions about subtle variations in accents across the city, others described the nuances of differential Black mixed-race aesthetics across the city. These visual codes of difference are invoked through Ezra's 'mental map' of the city below (Tonkiss 2005: 6). Unlike Chris, his personal cartography of Birmingham is not organized around dichotomous inner versus outer-city zones but instead he divides the city up around the cardinal points on a compass, locating himself in 'the south'.

> What I found is that… [mixed race girls in the south of the city] had grown with their mother… I'm stereotyping… longing to have a connection with their father… grown in a decent place… the structure. These are a lot of girls that I knew… because of the part of the city I'm from… south, so Balsall Heath, Moseley, Hall Green, Solihull. So the mixed race girls [there] are different from

> the ones in Lee Bank and… Winson Green and Ladywood – who were *road*[viii] […] these girls on this [south] side, were finger waves[ix] and pretty and big earrings […] the ones over this side […] were longing to connect with their Blackness, so […] what would happen is they'd come from… stable homes… but end up getting with rude boys. Real dargs, you know? […] and they had excellent jams down [Ladywood]. The mixed-race girls down there were Black girls. [Ezra, 41]

Ezra homogenizes the south of the city, despite the fact that the areas he names are qualitatively different. For example, Moseley and Solihull are relatively affluent areas, in comparison to his childhood neighbourhood Balsall Heath. Nevertheless, he bounds these areas together, highlighting the significance of shared borders and how localized lives converge. Ezra does not perceive of the inner-city areas he names as part of a homogenous geographical grouping in the way that Chris does. Rather, he distinguishes Balsall Heath from neighbourhoods such as Lee Bank or Ladywood by describing, what he sees as, the distinct cultural norms that characterise the different locations. These local practices, he claims, have a bearing on the 'type' of Black mixed-race identities that might form in the respective areas.

The gendered descriptions Ezra uses to convey different mixed-race subjects are also quite stark. In his portrayal of the supposed archetypal Black mixed-race south side girls, 'the historical spectre of the mulatta figure looms large' (Mitchell 2013: 240). He invokes respectability and class status through his descriptors which convey them as attractive women from stable homes. Despite their supposed privileged positionality, he suggests they are inflicted by an underlying sadness, which he associates with their distance from a Black identity. This sadness, he suggests, is reconciled through the south side mixed-race girl's sexuality and inevitable union with 'rude boys' and 'real dargs', a fate which Ezra constructs through discourses of deviance and tragedy. In contrast, Black mixed-race girls in places like Ladywood are described through their attitudinal traits. They are perceived as 'road' – their proximity to Blackness is not questioned, precisely because of their *emplacement* in localities which racialize them as *Black* (albeit mixed-race) girls.

Conclusion

Whilst empirical research on mixedness can tend to rely solely upon 'race' as the defining feature of the mixed-race experience, this article offers an alternative analysis and original contribution to Critical Mixed-Race Studies by examining Black mixed-race identity through a spatial lens. It argues that place is a dominant aspect of mixed-race identifications and that racial identity becomes knowable through places inhabited and moved through. Race was 'brought to life' in the participants' localities, often used as a reference point to negotiate ethnic identities and to make sense of others around them (Nayak 2011: 552). Participants often described and located their own racialized, gendered and classed identities through depictions of the 'character' of their localities (Massey 1995: 196). Place provided a spatial language through which to talk about oneself and, in a sense, could often become a proxy for identity. The significance of local 'microcultures of inclusion and exclusion' were particularly clear in narratives which denoted experiences of movement through the city into new places (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 291). Participants described localized cultures, dialects and even aesthetics as a way to distinguish different Black mixed-race typologies across the city. These personal perceptions of locality and difference show the heterogeneity of Black mixed-race identities. Building upon that, they show the extent to which Black mixed-race identity can be predicated on place, not solely race.

In thinking about the function of place and geography in the study of mixed-race identity we are too often tempted to tag the analysis to the topic of heritage and lineage. Whilst these conceptions of place certainly help us to comprehend how mixed-race identities are forged in relation to diasporic communities, complex family migration histories, ethnic group consciousness and membership, it is also necessary to look at different 'scales of belonging' when talking about place and mixed-race (Mahtani 2014: 48). This study has uncovered the significant identification processes that occur as mixed-race intersects with *immediate* environments and calls for more city and neighbourhood-level analyses of the mixed-race experience that account for these important localized contextual effects on mixed-race subjectivity.

By drawing upon multiple understandings of place in the analysis, the article also provides an insightful intervention to place-based and neighbourhood studies. By exploring what factors shape mixed-race *roots* within the city and their *routes* through it, this research has shown how place can operate as a temporal archive of materiality and memory. The materiality of the city, that has been crafted through time by racist housing policy, city planning, slum clearance operations, the fallout of wartime bombing and de-industrialisation, has created cartographies of race that feature inner and outer city zones, internal borders, so-called 'black' and 'white' neighbourhoods. Working within and against these maps, social institutions like youth clubs and Black churches have become sites where counter-cultures and alternative mapping practices have been cultivated that nourish Black life, identity and culture. This architecture of sorts has grouped people together at different times in particular places, creating the conditions for *roots* within different parts of the city to become racialized and multiple mixed-race identities across the city to be realized. At the same time, I have highlighted how personal memories of the city intersect with social histories of Birmingham to form a dense archive of racialized spatial stories that are drawn (and redrawn) by the participants as they moved through the city in their mind. These stories and narrations of place show how place-making is an affective and relational process that holds multiple meanings in mixed-race lives and provides a profound insight into the localised nature of racialized identities.

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[i] Participants are Mixed White and Black Caribbean. For the most part “Black mixed-race” is used to refer to the research population in order to signal and recognize the centrality of “Blackness” as a determining factor in participants lives and “race” as a salient discourse they encounter. Occasionally, “mixed-race” is used standalone to denote the participants.

[ii] From here on out these are referred to as the 60s-born, 70s-born and 80s-born cohorts for ease, the number of participants in each cohort were 10, 11 and 16, respectively.

[iii] Old bomb sites, craters, deserted pieces of ground, debris and derelict buildings left over from heavy war-time bombing and wasteland sites where residential redevelopment had stagnated.
[iv] The person within a Sound System who speaks and/or rhymes over the music 'using wit and verbal dexterity to talk about one's roots and culture, or to lampoon the politicians or the police', as Zephaniah describes (2019: 93).
[v] Shebeens and blues parties were unlicensed establishments or private house parties set up in response to racist policies in public pubs and clubs which excluded Black people and Black music.
[vi] The curators of an exhibition in Birmingham in 2015, *Sound System Culture,* identified one hundred and twelve sound systems in the Birmingham area operating from the 1960s to the 1990s.
[vii] Citizenship granted through birth in the given territory or land.
[viii] Slang for 'streetwise'.
[ix] Originally a 1920s/30s hairstyle in which the hair is moulded in to 'S' shaped curves. It became a popular Black hairstyle during the 1990s, often donned by well-known hip-hop artists such as Missy Elliott.