

“Balms to our aching souls”: Patterns of feeling in postwar Britain’s Caribbean migrant parties

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On 13 July 1948, the docking of the SS *Empire Windrush* not four weeks gone, Mr. S. Bell – a 22-year-old Jamaican RAF veteran – attempted to visit the Acacia Ballroom in Liverpool. When he arrived, he and his friends were turned away, being told by security that ‘I have instructions not to pass any coloured people’.¹ The promoter did not seem to register the contradiction of having a ‘coloured band’² performing that night but denying entry to black would-be patrons, speaking to Paul Gilroy’s assertion that black people in Britain were permitted as cultural producers but not as consumers.³ This paradox embedded within a racialised and spatialised cultural politics would become defining feature of the leisure landscape of postwar Britain.

Although Britain’s postwar migration flow from the Caribbean has received voluminous popular and scholarly attention, this has, with few exceptions, been confined to the arenas of housing and employment, and read through the issues of identity, discrimination, and racial politics.⁴ This paper represents an early attempt to redress this historiographical oversight by examining two of the most important social spaces which Caribbean migrants constructed for themselves in Britain: house parties, and their supersedence or transmutation into blues parties

¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 14 July 1948. See also *Liverpool Echo*, 13 July 1948.

² *Ibid.*

³ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1991), 160-1. I would like to thank Jason McGraw for pointing this out in ‘Sonic Settlements: Jamaican Music, Dancing, and Black Migrant Communities in Postwar Britain’, *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 2 (2018), 5.

⁴ See, for example, Kennetta H. Perry, *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration: ‘Race’ and ‘Race Relations’ in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992); Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Sociological Study of a Recent West Indian Group in Brixton, South London* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963); and Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1998). For notable exceptions which explicitly deal with postwar black leisure spaces in Britain, see McGraw, ‘Sonic Settlements’; Michael McMillan, ‘Rockers, Soulheads and Lovers: Sound Systems Back in Da Day: Ingenta Connect’, *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 9, no. 1 (2018): 9–27; and William ‘Lez’ Henry and Matthew Worley, eds., ‘Rebel Music in the Rebel City: The Performance Geography of the Nottingham “Blues Party”, 1957–1987’, in *Narratives from Beyond the UK Reggae Bassline: The System Is Sound* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 185–207.

from the late 1950s. One common understanding of the distinction between a house and a blues party was the latter's shift toward regularity and commercialisation; whilst both were held in homes, house parties were *gratis* and singular events, whereas "the blues" levied entry fees and recurred with an element of frequency. More about the differences between these spaces will follow, but it is important to keep these fundamental distinctions in mind throughout. Nevertheless, both formats represent critical arenas where a gamut of issues coalesced: negotiations of specific instances of diasporic identity, the ways in which social values come to be invested in place and space, and the production and consumption of new cultural forms were exercised and enacted against a wider historical context marked out by exclusionary practices and cultural dislocation. The following paper examines these leisure spaces by foregrounding how the dynamic interaction between these issues produced a changing landscape of emotional experience and expression buried lightly under their surfaces. We will first consider some of the more enduring emotional styles which set a rough framework for migrant house parties and which would be carried over into the age of blues parties. Once this foundation has been laid, we will turn to those affective styles which typified earlier house parties, leading us on to a discussion of the transition into "the blues", and the particular affective and sensory changes which it ushered in.

Affective functionalism and emotional attenuation

The overall dynamics of emotional experience and expression within these parties is best thought through a functional lens: these spaces represented – and were indeed structured to facilitate – zones of affective reorientation whereby partygoers could simultaneously allay unwanted feelings and achieve certain, more desired emotional states. Although many of the specific affective qualities to be attenuated or amplified changed over time, commensurate with wider changes in historical conditions, demographics, and cultural consumption, these emotional objective-oriented dynamics were largely retained throughout this period. Further, we can also highlight certain emotional states which migrants invested with enduring values over the broad sweep of this period.

The most important of these was the construction of Caribbean migrant parties as spaces for the cathartic release of frustration, tension and pressure. Such affective states were the unsought consequence of living and emoting under a set of highly specific historical conditions, and one of the main avenues of approach to these felt experiences was structural: The knowledge of being underemployed in low-skilled jobs, the bodily impacts of their long hours and physical demands, and the daily humiliations of poverty – all of which the result of racism seeping in to postwar Britain’s socio-economic structure which ultimately pushed migrants in to a racially-designated underclass. Ainsley Grant, a qualified engineer, reported to an industrial firm in Nottingham one Monday to begin his new role. Having been asked about his knowledge of diesel engines in the interview, he had expected a role commensurate with his qualifications. Instead, ‘the foreman gave me a bucket, a broom and a shovel ... I chucked the broom right back at the foreman and walked out’.⁵ Another migrant spoke of migrants feeling ‘tired like hell, but ... going to work all the same’.⁶ This was, of course, if migrants could even secure a job in a society markedly hostile to black labour in the first place. All these conditioned combined to produce feelings of frustration: Donald Hinds, for instance, recounts the ‘frustrating experience’ of migrants trying to secure work at labour exchanges, where they heard clerks talking with employers who would simply not countenance black applicants.⁷ Mike Nesbeth, who migrated from Jamaica aged fifteen, asserts that ‘you could feel the frustration building up day by day’,⁸ whilst his compatriot Wallace Collins also draws upon feelings of frustration to help evoke his experiential lifeworld in his 1965 biography *Jamaican Migrant*.⁹ Don Letts is more upfront about such lived realities, mentioning his parents ‘having to put up with a lot of shit over the week’.¹⁰ Another key contextual source from which these affective states flowed was the discrimination faced in the housing market, racist landlords pushing migrants in to the hands of

⁵ Donald Hinds, *Journey to an Illusion: West Indian Migrants in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 60-1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸ Mike Nesbeth quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, 299.

⁹ Wallace Barrymore Collins, *Jamaican Migrant* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 96.

¹⁰ Don Letts quoted in Colin Grant, *Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush Generation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), Kindle edition, location 326.

less scrupulous property owners who possessed the worst of an already substandard housing stock. Vince Reid, who migrated from Jamaica in 1948, remembers his father finally securing a room and describes the conditions along with the affective states attached to them: 'We were forced to live in one room, all three of us. You can imagine the tension, two adults and a thirteen-year-old boy in one room. It was horrendous'.¹¹ In addition, for most of this period these issues played out within a particular historical moment wherein the Caribbean community, and its relative presence in the workplace, was growing but far from substantial, drawing in to this affective palette shades of isolation and loneliness. These feelings, of course, cannot be thought solely through simple quantitative enumeration; they are also the product of the contemporary emotional styles of the host society toward a black presence and its constituent practices of avoidance, hostility, discrimination, violence, and exclusion. Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe evoke these emotional sinews which connect workplace racism to structural economics succinctly, and without need for reference to Marx's alienation: 'racial tensions and the pressures of a hard, long working routine made loneliness and isolation a reality for us'.¹² These racio-structural concerns slotted in to a wider experiential frame of reference for these migrants which drew in the impact of cultural dislocation. Mike Nesbeth surmises the diffuse and multidirectional sources of these frustrations, tensions, and loneliness when he wrote of: 'the pressures of the climate, situation, the culture, the food, the hostility against you as a man of colour'.¹³ The black migrant emotional experience in this period, then, was one marked by frustration, tension, pressure, and loneliness.

Parties would come to occupy a critical space for the suspension and attenuation of such affective states. As May Cambridge asked, 'what else could we do to relieve the frustrations of a suppressed life in Britain?'.¹⁴ This was as much to do with the shared sensory experiences and social rituals inherent to the format as anything else. Gathering with one's own, communal

¹¹ Vince Reid quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, 92.

¹² Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Verso, 2018), 37.

¹³ Mike Nesbeth quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, 299.

¹⁴ *Forty Winters On: Memories of Britain's Post War Caribbean Immigrants* (London: South London Press and The Voice, 1988), 35.

eating and drinking, the collective consumption of music, and the practice of dancing all exercised profound effects of emotional attenuation on these partygoers, helping to bracket, suspend, or suppress the negatively-valued affective states mentioned above. Beresford Edwards recalled that partygoers 'loved the warmth of each other, comfort and company',¹⁵ whilst Chris Hope says that 'you were glad to see other black people, to be honest'.¹⁶ Ken Corbin, meanwhile, evokes the links between sensory experience, social rituals, and the body: 'you would prepare your chicken, souse, and patties ... people would come to dance and enjoy themselves. That was our entertainment'.¹⁷ What this ultimately meant, from the point of view of affective attenuation, is that parties became a 'lifeline'¹⁸ and a place to 'let off a bit of steam'.¹⁹ Donald Hinds best encapsulated these effects when he described the parties as 'balms to our aching souls'.²⁰ For Caribbean migrants living, working, and emoting under historical conditions of enormous strenuousness, house and blues parties were affective coping mechanisms and places of emotional relief of enormous importance for the nascent diaspora.

Violence, fear, hate

A contributing element toward the tension and pressure which was to be bracketed or suspended at parties was the acute threat of violence faced by migrants throughout the 1950s and 1960s. However, the significance of such racist practices reaches beyond affective attenuation to straddle both sides of parties' objective-orientated emotional functionalism. From their earliest beginnings, part of the experiential power of migrant parties resided in their ability to circumscribe a spatial zone free from the hatred, fear, and racism within the host society's emotional culture, and in particular their expressions through verbal or physical violence. In so doing, parties became places to actively *attain* emotional states of safety and

¹⁵ 'Case Study 29: Transcript of Interview with Beresford Edwards' (Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Centre, 2000), 13-14.

¹⁶ Chris Hope quoted in 'Generations: Celebrating 50 Years of Caribbean Recruitment' (Transport for London, n.d.), 25.

¹⁷ Ken Corbin quoted in Z. Nia Reynolds, ed., *When I Came to England: An Oral History of Life in 1950s and 1960s Britain* (London: Black Stock Photo-Press, 2001), 145.

¹⁸ Peter John Nelson quoted Grant, *Homecoming*, Kindle edition, location 309.

¹⁹ Owen Townsend quoted Grant, *Homecoming*, Kindle edition, location 308.

²⁰ Donald Hinds, 'The "Island" of Brixton', *Oral History* 8, no. 1 (1980), 50.

security. The spaces within which these parties were held – migrant homes – were already inscribed with these affective values, forged against the precarious emotional associations of the public space separated from the home by a few millimetres of glass. The enactment of parties, however, became spaces for the intentional attainment and intensification of these affective associations; rather than being passive epiphenomena of the events, these spaces, and the objects and practices within them, were actively structured, manipulated, and performed to create such emotional experiences. As one would expect when dealing with questions of violence, the body becomes central to this. The dance floor was a safe and circumscribed space for the dense concentration of black bodies, where it was common to have ‘hardly any room for jiving because of how closely packed the floor was’.²¹ Because of the volume of the music and ‘because space is so limited’, communication was ‘made with the body’ – inviting important questions about such practices’ nature and purpose.²² Donald Hinds, for instance, views these dense spaces as ‘an excuse for bodies touching’, highlighting the latent atmospheres of eroticism.²³ Given the emotional and psychological seams running through the rockface of this historical context and within which these actors were operating, with its white pathological vacillation between the fetishisation and demonisation of black sexuality, reading the Caribbean migrant dancefloor as a space where partygoers could operate within erotic codes set by them and free from white interference is not incorrect. However, the physical touch engendered by such tight and frictional confines might also be read, when considering the latent threat of violence, not merely as expressions of eroticism but as mutual affirmations of security and protection. In such a reading, the manipulation of objects and the structuring of space become tools to facilitate the dense and tactile congregation of bodies and thus *felt* experiences of safety, with furniture commonly removed from the main dancing room to maximise capacity, and either the Bluespot radiogram was pushed into the corner or else replaced by a sound system’s stack of speakers. “Doctor”, a Nottingham sound system operator in the late 1950s, explicitly lays out what was at stake behind his motivations, and the historical

²¹ Donald Hinds quoted in Reynolds, *England*, 166.

²² Ken Pryce, *Endless Pressure: A Study of West Indian Lifestyles in Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1986), 100.

²³ Donald Hinds quoted in Reynolds, *England*, 166.

context within which they were mobilised: 'I started the first sound system ... to bring black people together, because things was hard for us in those days. The Teddy Boys were bad attacking black people'.²⁴ Mike Nesbeth, meanwhile, reaches beyond the precarity of black bodies to locate the importance of these parties ultimately within emotional dynamics: 'When people say safety in numbers it's not just from a physical point of view. That is one format. There's safety in feeling safe from the hostile environment around here'.²⁵ The centripetal force of Caribbean migrant parties facilitated the congregation of black bodies in a dense space, a space marked out by tactility and physical touch which ultimately allowed partygoers to achieve the desired emotional states of safety and security, and by so doing participate in experiential qualities which subverted those aspects of Britain's emotional regime which deemed black safety a deviant mode of feeling.

Unique attributes of early house parties: The front room and its values

It was these elements which not only shaped the emotional atmospheres of early parties, but would be largely retained as house parties gave way to blues parties. Yet these earlier social spaces also carried with them distinct characteristics in their form, structure, and enactment, and it is important to draw these out for they influenced the emotional experiences of the partygoers within.

This begins, first and foremost, with a distinct spatial context of enactment. Early parties were usually held in the front room – a site which, as Michael McMillan demonstrated in a landmark exhibition, was of enormous cultural significance to Caribbean migrants.²⁶ On a certain level the import of the front room reaches beyond the historical specificities of this group in that it functioned as a site where particular sets of social codes and gendered values were produced, arranged, presented, and replicated. Having developed from the Victorian parlour room, we find that not only are the era's notions of respectability, domesticity, and

²⁴ Doctor quoted in Michael McMillan, 'Dub in the Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics of the Sacred and the Secular' 3, no. 1 (2019), 191.

²⁵ Mike Nesbeth quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, 299.

²⁶ The West Indian Front Room: Memories and impressions of Black British Homes, Geffrye Museum, 2005-06.

propriety central to this space, but its dynamics of perspective are largely retained. Like the parlour room, the front room was a place to entertain guests and thus acted not merely as a family's projection of these cultural values but a projection of them to the outside world; an outward-facing portal to the interior of the family.²⁷ The conceptual key which ties these values and dynamics together rests on a projection of status, an identity performance which one is inviting, persuading, others to accept. It represents, in microcosm, the power structures of the Western nuclear family as they are projected along generational and gendered lines. A place from which children were excluded, except perhaps on Sundays; a place for the husband's relaxation and entertainment; and a place where wives made aesthetic decisions and kept clean.

On another level, however, the import and function of the front room becomes filtered through our historical context to produce a unique, creolised space. Not only are its cultural values learned through the prism of a colonial Caribbean context, but the historical specificities of this migration experience come to assert their sway on the room. The contexts from which the cultural value of homeownership arose within this group – the precarity of arrival, the economic motif of underemployment, and the structural racism of the housing market – shape the affective values ascribed to the interior rooms once homes were bought. Norma Walker, recalling the squalid, Rachmanesque room sharing of the early Caribbean experience, asserts that the front room 'was so special to a West Indian because we had got so used to that one little room'.²⁸ The spatial zone of the front room itself inherently contained these affective tones, but just as important was its role as a frame for material objects which struck the same chords, producing an orchestral ensemble of purchasing power, material splendour – and thus status – which hosts invited guests to hear. The centrepiece was the Bluespot radiogram, a combined phonogram, radio, and speaker system housed in a wooden cabinet without which 'no front room was complete'.²⁹ The gram was the focal point of entertainment in Caribbean

²⁷ Stuart Hall, 'The "West Indian" Front Room', in *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home*, ed. Michael McMillan (London: Black Dog, 2009), 17-23.

²⁸ Norma Walker quoted in McMillan, *Front Room*, 29.

²⁹ Grant, *Homecoming*, Kindle edition, location 294.

living spaces throughout the 1950s, but because of its price also functioned as a weighty waymarker of spending power and upward social mobility for guests. This would regularly be flanked with hire-purchase furniture, distinguished by a film of protective plastic wrapping which covered it. Glass cabinets would contain ornaments or objects which simultaneously spoke to domestic utility and spending power: Norma Walker reflects on the communicative value of these objects when she says ‘when friends came around you would want them to say “look at these lovely plates, look at these cups and saucers. Oh! She’s earning loads of money!”’.³⁰

During parties, these were the evaluations which hosts desired guests take from such objects. And yet come party night, guests actively projected their own identity performances, and indeed used objects to do so. Without the canvas of the front room this necessitated a sparser brush. Two ways to achieve this were the practices of “bringing a bottle of something” or else helping to underwrite the costs for the party’s food. The supply of alcohol and food was, of course, a part of the identity performance of hosts: the day of the party was spent preparing chicken, souse, and curried goat, which multiplied the domesticity of the household and their perception as providers, breadwinners, and capable of properly hosting guests. But by contributing materially and financially to such rituals, guests carved out an identity performance of their own along the same lines. Guests’ most important tool, however, was sartorial aesthetics – guests would attend, immaculately cleaned and groomed, in their smartest and most expensive clothes. Maxi Jazz remembers his father hosting parties at their family home where ‘all the men would show up in suits, usually dark, with a little skinny tie’.³¹ It was through these aesthetic choices that guests could participate in mutual projections and recognitions of the respectable traits of status, spending power, and upward social mobility.

One of the most interesting intersections between sartorialism, objects, and projections of respectability rests on the role of children within party spaces. With parenthood and childrearing practices central to the cultural values of domesticity, respectability, and propriety,

³⁰ Norma Walker quoted in McMillan, *Front Room*, 29.

³¹ Maxi Jazz quoted in David Matthews, *Voices of the Windrush Generation: The Real Story Told by the People Themselves* (London: Blink Publishing, 2018), 235.

one of the functions of children – from the perspective of adults – was not dissimilar to the inanimate objects they used in the front room as value-communicating tools. Operating through a demarcation of space, the front room was a key vector for the projection of familial power structures, a place associated with adulthood, and in particular with the patriarch: ‘the front room was sacrosanct, a designated area marked off for our father’s entertainment’.³² Children were thus excluded from this space, only allowed to enter either on Sundays or, tellingly, during parties. Operating largely on the premise of “children should be seen and not heard”, young people during these events were embedded in the object-orientated identity projections of hosts and guests: ‘we had to sit there for what seemed like an eternity – largely ignored by the big people’.³³ Within this presentation of children, the question of sartorial aesthetics again returns. The presence of children *per se* meant little for projections of domesticity if they looked uncared and unprovided for, and thus would be accordingly dressed in ways which mirrored the formality of the adults: ‘in stiff tweed suits – their sunday best’.³⁴ The permittal of children into the front room during parties represents a temporary suspension of certain domestic codes and spatial demarcations, but simultaneously a reinforcement of parents’ familial cachet, and thus respectability.

But children were not – and perhaps this goes without saying – merely objects. Aside from other affective dynamics from the perspective of adults (the immaculate presentation of children can be read forcefully as expressions of material providence, care, and love) children also exercised a measure of agency within these parties, shaping circumstances to suit their own ends. Maxi Jazz remembers being allowed to choose records at his father’s parties, and used this to his advantage: ‘when I felt like I hadn’t had enough attention over the course of the evening, I’d put on one of my records ... just to interrupt the flow a little bit’. This inevitably drew the ire of the adults, but to him ‘it didn’t matter that they were yelling at me, I was the centre of attention for two minutes’.³⁵

³² Sonia Saunders quoted in Grant, *Homecoming*, Kindle edition, location 314.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Maxi Jazz quoted in David Matthews, *Voices of the Windrush Generation: The Real Story Told by the People Themselves* (London: Blink Publishing, 2018), 235.

Intimacy

The presence, functions, and actions of children also hint at wider questions of attendance and demographic composition within these early party spaces, and these questions become additional distinguishing characteristics of these events compared to the blues parties which were to come. The visibility of children at these early parties bespeaks, as one might expect, to a far more familial demographic composition. These spaces were attended, by and large, by a handful of nuclear families – they were ‘family-oriented’, as Allyson Williams remembers.³⁶ And insofar as the nuclear family is a key vehicle through which the concepts of domesticity and respectability are mobilised, this became another way for migrants to project and participate within these cultural-affective frameworks.

Additionally, in terms of sheer numbers, these house parties were far more localised and smaller-scale, hosts knowing all guests personally or at most by one degree of separation. The following week, the host would turn into the hosted as parties alternated between the different homes of the participants within tight social networks. Not only did this afford each migrant household the opportunity to use manipulations of space and objects to project their own identity performances, but mirrored the nature of the incipient postwar migration flow, the black presence remaining relatively small throughout most of the 1950s. Read within this context, early parties also functioned to enable Caribbean migrants to meet one-another in scattered and often lonely communities; they were ‘a way of meeting a lot of West Indians’.³⁷

With these distinct demographic compositions comes distinct dynamics of interpersonal relations. On the level of community, in these early years black people would commonly acknowledge each other in the course of the navigation of public space, even if there was no mutual familiarity: British-Jamaican comedian Lenny Henry, growing up in Dudley in the 1950s, remembers his parents ‘walking around and nodding to other black people who I didn’t know. “Who was that?” “Oh, I don’t know. It’s just somebody, you’ve got to show your respect. Just to

³⁶ Allyson Williams quoted in Matthews, *Voices*, 167.

³⁷ Joan Springer quoted in John Western, *A Passage to England: Barbadian Londoners Speak of Home* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 145.

say Hello, it's good to just incline your head'''.³⁸ Such dynamics seeped into early party spaces from these wider fora, powerfully conditioning their affective interactivity and levels of intimacy: 'at that time ... everybody was familiar, it was small'.³⁹ These micro-climates, and the higher levels of intimacy within them, also served more quotidian purposes, as these parties became sites for the diffusion of knowledge and the construction of support networks. Here, partygoers could learn about available properties and job vacancies, and receive news about mutual acquaintances back in the Caribbean.⁴⁰

Early house parties and emotivity

We should now think through these unique characteristics of early parties in terms of emotional experience. The common denominator in most of these attributes returns us to the question of an identity projection of respectability, domesticity, and propriety, and I would like to suggest that rather than interpreting them purely as expressions of status and upward social mobility – ends in themselves – we ask why these were desired cultural expressions and formulate answers which go beyond the remit of social psychology. The successful projection of these identity performances, at root level, revolves around the generation of emotions, and whilst one could read these emotions as narcissistic or egotistical a far more compelling reading comes when we construe these strivings for certain emotional states positively. Feelings of pride, of self-worth, and of self-affirmation are generated when others perceive one to be operating within the historically-contingent value systems of respectability, domesticity, and upward social mobility, and this assumes critical importance once we factor in the historical context. Many of these migrants' experiences were typified by underemployment, a precarious arrival, and a structural shove into an underclass; by participating in value systems that the dominant society tried to exclude them from, they disrupted traditional metropolitan flows of discursive power to generate their own feelings of self-worth. Parties then, as sites which effectively facilitate the expression of these value systems, become functional tools for the

³⁸ Lenny Henry quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, 143.

³⁹ Allyson Williams quoted in Matthews, *Voices*, 167.

⁴⁰ Don Letts, *Don Letts Explains the 'Blues Dance'*, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVZldfPitN4>.

attainment of such positively-conceived emotional states – places where all may experience these emotions and, no doubt, justify to oneself that the tribulations of the journey and the uprootedness of one’s life had, in some measure, been worth it.

The shift to the blues

‘By the end of the fifties’, Donald Hinds says, ‘it no longer made economic sense to adequately provide drinks for nearly a hundred people’.⁴¹ It was in this moment that house parties began morphing into blues parties and, as Hinds indicates, one of the most significant alterations relates to questions of scale. These were far larger and far more rambunctious affairs; attendance grew and became less tied to the immediate social networks of the hosts, and with this shift the intimacy of the earlier parties either evaporated or was transformed. Knowledge of blues parties was circulated amongst complex diasporic networks in places such as barbershops, factory floors, other dance floors, and, curiously enough, schools. Sharon Frazer-Carroll remembers distributing invitations for her mother’s blues parties by ‘asking our black friends at school to pass them to their parents’.⁴² To facilitate the increased attendance, the main dance floor shifted from the sacrosanct front room and in to the larger basement. It was in this historical moment, too, that the commercialisation of parties begins. Charges would be levied for entry, and makeshift bars selling unlicensed alcohol and food – curried goat and rice the mainstay – erected. Motives for parties thus became not purely emotional or experiential, but economic. With transnational echoes of Harlem’s rent parties, and in a Catholic indulgence-like collision of the spiritual and the economic, Don Letts explains: ‘they provided an important social function, because it’s where people could feel free and elevate your spirit ... another function was economic. People would get together and say “ok, we’ll have a party round Don Brown’s house” ... at the end of the session, Don Brown would have some money to feed or clothe his family’.⁴³ Before we continue however, it is important to understand that smaller,

⁴¹ Hinds, ‘Island’, 51.

⁴² Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, *Mother Country: Real Stories of the Windrush Children* (London: Headline, 2018), 89.

⁴³ Don Letts, ‘Blues Dance’.

more family-oriented parties shot through with domesticity and propriety would persist throughout this period. A *Times* reporter, attending one of these smaller house parties in 1965, 'looked for sin' but found 'no money change hands'; only two people drunk; 'no drugs'; and, in a clear demonstration of the way that domesticity was central to these gatherings and the gendered spaces that existed *within* these parties, a group of women in a room upstairs 'doing their knitting'.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, they were increasingly eclipsed in the 1960s by the format of the blues party in terms of size, scope, and popularity.

The blues, nostalgia, and longing

Beginning with the growth of blues parties in the late 1950s, we find evidence both of Caribbean migrant parties' robustness as a social form and their exceptional emotional malleability. In this moment, an additional affective quality begins to assert itself on dance floors with increasing force: an emotional nostalgia which sought to recreate, re-present, and re-experience the social, emotional, and sensory milieus of their home islands. This is precisely where changing historical circumstances again help elicit changing emotional experiences. Towards the close of the 1950s there was a critical shift of sentiment amongst these migrants; many began to realise they were not here for a temporary sojourn and were, almost unbeknownst to themselves, settling down. Mike Philips locates the fulcrum of this shift within the racial attacks of 1958: after this, a 'changed mood' amongst Caribbean migrants emerged which revolved around 'making a decision about what you did with your life here; that you weren't just passing through'.⁴⁵ There is evidence to support migrants paradoxically inverting the objective of racist attackers to "Keep Britain White", but in actuality this realisation ran across a chronological spectrum, coming to some like Alford Gardner earlier, and others later.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 21 January 1965.

⁴⁵ Mike Philips quoted in Amanda Reilly, 'Time Shift: Notting Hill '58' (BBC Four, 1 July 2003).

⁴⁶ For the paradoxical inversion, see Baron Baker quoted in Amanda Reilly, 'Time Shift: Notting Hill '58' (BBC Four, 1 July 2003): 'I was determined that Britain would never be "Kept White" ... so to Keep It White you have to kill me then, and carry me out in the bloody box'. For Alford Gardner, see BBC News, *Windrush Generation: Three Stories - BBC News*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NME-9ot2Lqw>: 'The plan was to come to England, get a good job, work for about five years, go back, raise five children and watch my vineyards grow – but it wasn't to be. within five years I started a family, married, bought my house, working hard and settled down'.

Nevertheless, ‘ten years after migration really got into its stride, it was plain that West Indians were not here to just fetch fire, as the Jamaicans would put it’.⁴⁷ An unnamed Jamaican conceded ‘I know that I will not be going back. My wife knows that she will never be going back, but we never admit it to each other’, and it is within these inexpressible feelings that it is possible to locate the nostalgic import of the blues dance.⁴⁸ And with ideologies of return no longer on the table, nostalgia and longing began to permeate Caribbean diasporic culture from multiple angles, ultimately seeping into the emotional fabric of blues parties. In a curious idiosyncratic twist, these emotions were not explicitly present – or at least, not commonly acknowledged – within these spaces. Instead, they manifested themselves in desires to recreate the experiential conditions – sensory and bodily – of the islands they had migrated from. Nostalgia and longing provided key emotional substrates to these parties, with practices, patterns of consumption, and the construction of environments geared toward particular sensory experiences becoming the mechanisms used to create these affective “return migrations”. Blues parties were increasingly about *feeling* one was back home. A Jamaican man said ‘to me, the importance of Jamaica is that it is there’ – but increasingly for these migrants, the importance of the Caribbean was that it was *here*.⁴⁹

This was enacted, firstly, on the level of the body. Blues parties became spaces where one could use the body to interpret rhythm in manners which increasingly mirrored the rituals and movements inscribed in the sending country’s cultural codes surrounding dance. The earlier parties of the 1950s were largely focused on British and US dance forms, such as the jive, foxtrot, and rumba, and these largely mirrored Caribbean listening tastes of the time which also originated outside the Caribbean. And whilst some migrants enjoyed showing ‘white people how to do the jive’⁵⁰ in the dance halls that were open to them, ground zero for these bodily practices were their parties: ‘We smooched to Billy Ecksteine and Sarah Vaughan, and Shirley

⁴⁷ Hinds, *Journey*, 158.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Vivienne Francis, *With Hope in Their Eyes: The Compelling Stories of the Windrush Generation* (London: Nia, 1998), 49.

and Lee; and jived to jazz rhythms, and to Antonio 'Fats' Domino's *Blue Berry Hill*'.⁵¹ Joyce Gladwell recalls watching several white couples dancing 'without joy or ability' at her university department's Christmas party in the 1950s and, watching this, 'longed to dance as we would at home – because we enjoyed moving to music, arriving at one's preferred style or dancing and finding a partner to suit, not bound to waltz to a waltz or writhe to the rhumba, so long as one moved in rhythm with the beat of the music and above all delighting in it'.⁵² Here, Gladwell paints an image of the less structured and regularised dance practices in Jamaica, and affords us a critical insight into an emotional prescription surrounding dance: one must "delight" in it.

To enter into these emotional prescriptions and practices, Gladwell need only have attended a blues dance in Britain rather than crossing the Atlantic. In his 1965 book *Jamaican Migrant*, Wallace Collins recalls one such party. After expressing bemusement over how fellow Caribbeans were behaving exactly as they would at home despite being 'exposed both to the English and European ways of life', Collins immediately turns to the example of dance, and the intersection he evokes between the body, emotional expression, and notions of "home" is instructive: the 'old houses in Willesden were rocking from the stomping and shuffling ... this joy, this abandon, this happy rowdyism, evoked memories of life in Jamaica'. This became, for these migrants, 'their own way of dancing their own interpretation of their emotions, of what they felt and wished to express through dancing'.⁵³ The relationship between emotion and memory is given concrete embodiment in such historical circumstances. The nostalgia and longing for a Caribbean which many migrants had begun to suspect that they might not return to, and which increasingly shaped the experiential conditions of these parties, finds its enactment, in a complex chain of causation, through other emotions ("this joy, this abandon, this happy rowdyism") and through culturally-proximal bodily interpretations of rhythm. Ultimately, they contained the power to evoke stored memories of the "homes" from which they came.

⁵¹ Donald Hinds quoted in Reynolds, *England*, 166-7.

⁵² Joyce Gladwell, *Brown Face, Big Master* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 2003), 71.

⁵³ Wallace Barrymore Collins, *Jamaican Migrant*, 96-7.

Nostalgia and a longing for “home” found its most forceful translation, however, in the cultivation of sensory experiences. The convergence here with the above discussion on the role of the body in these emotions is clear – bodily interpretation of rhythm necessarily involves a component of aurality, and the marshalling of this sensory perception around shifting musical forms represents a key site for the conversion of nostalgia and longing into practice and expression. Music became a lathe upon which a fleeting return to the Caribbean was shaped. Although calypso was a continuous presence on migrant radiograms throughout the 1950s, it was often accompanied by other, transnational genres from the black Atlantic such as American jazz and rhythm and blues. Beginning in the 1960s, however, a wave of Caribbeanisation swept over the listening habits of migrants, commensurate with the increasing influence of Jamaican musical forms in particular. This began with the growth and then explosion of ska – a Jamaican dance music modelled on American rhythm and blues but decidedly Caribbean and decidedly creolised, drawing upon Jamaican mento, Trinidadian calypso, and Afro-Cuban jazz, with its distinctive emphasis on syncopation and the upbeat. Artists such as Prince Buster, Derrick Morgan, and Millie Small were key drivers of this musical trend, whose records were increasingly played by Britain’s earliest sound systems, another imported Jamaican cultural form which would emerge from their incubators in blues parties to help shape decades of black British cultural expression.⁵⁴

Highlighting the way sensory experience circles back to questions of the body, part of the ska craze involved novel dance forms developed in Jamaica. “Ska-ing” – later “skanking” – is marked by its ebullience, rhythmic jerks, and extreme extensions of the limbs. At these parties, aural sensory experiences feed back into the body and allows one not only to access the Caribbean of their memories, but to access its cultural cutting edge. Consuming the region’s localised music forms and dance practices at blues parties ultimately meant, for these migrants, that they could ‘for a brief moment on a Saturday night take us way back to the Caribbean’.⁵⁵ From the 1960s, however, the pace of musical innovation in Jamaica was accelerating at a

⁵⁴ Ska was also called Bluebeat, mainly by white Britons, after the label which helped popularise the genre. Millie Small’s 1964 hit “My Boy Lollipop” sparked the ska craze, and crossed racial divides to become popular with white British society. See Millie Small, *My Boy Lollipop*, 7" Single (Jamaica: Beverley’s Records, 1964).

⁵⁵ Mike Nesbeth quoted in Phillips and Phillips, *Windrush*, 299.

brehtaking rate, and if migrants wanted to experientially recreate the contemporary Caribbean they would need to keep abreast of these changing trends. By the second half of the 1960s, the ska craze had largely petered out, musical artists taking its creolised template and adapting it into what we know as rocksteady. Performed at a dramatically slower tempo, shorn of its bright horns and replaced by the melodiousness of the piano and an emphasised bass, it would eventually become a key influence in the development of reggae in the 1970s. British sound system operators and their audiences took to it in earnest, and largely for the same emotional reasons: rocksteady was ‘so warm and sweet it take us right back to the Caribbean’.⁵⁶

The capacity for sensory stimulation to evoke re-experiences of migrants’ sending countries was quickly recognised by companies, who exploited the commercial opportunity of these affective desires in what we might term an emotional economics of nostalgia. Nowhere was this more evident than for those companies supplying products to be consumed at parties. Melodisc, the record label which largely drove the popularisation of ska in Britain, ran advertisements in black community newspapers and magazines leading with the dictum ‘you’ll *feel* at home...’.⁵⁷ Such emotional economics extended from the phonograph to the palette. In their advertisements, Caribbean alcohol brands aligned themselves closely with the region: Jamaica’s Red Stripe lager stated ‘now you can get it over here — Jamaica’s favourite lager beer’, shipped straight from the Caribbean sunshine,⁵⁸ while Wray & Nephew’s overlaid promotions of their Appleton Estate rum with maps of the island.⁵⁹ Distribution networks importing these and other Caribbean brands sprang up across Britain: one such was K.A. Morgan LTD, based in Kings Cross, London, and Handsworth, Birmingham, which imported Red Stripe lager and Wray and Nephew’s rum, advertising themselves as bringing migrants ‘the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ See, for example, *Flamingo*, December 1962, 17. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ *Flamingo*, August 1962, 45.

⁵⁹ *Flamingo*, August 1963, 7.

drinks from home’,⁶⁰ whilst Consumer Wines Ltd advertised themselves as selling ‘rum like home – 100% proof – ideal for parties’.⁶¹

The decline of the blues

Although *New Musical Express* proclaimed in 1981 shebeens to be a ‘great British institution’, the decade proved to be the last gasp for unlicensed, commercialised parties.⁶² In the 1950s black migrants discovered that racial exclusion from social spaces did not preclude some whites from launching physical and discursive assaults on the autonomous leisure spaces they had created as a consequence of those exclusionary practices. Since their inception these parties comprised a significant element in intra-community tension and began, in the 1960s, to be placed by whites near the top of the docket of their list of grievances. For white neighbours, these tensions pivoted around a clutch of affective issues, with resent over noise usually the common denominator: The issue of “noisy parties” was known to local police constabularies as early as 1961,⁶³ and in the following year John Cordeaux, MP for Nottingham Central, was receiving at least one complaint per week about ‘noisy night parties’ which ‘do more harm to race relations than can be imagined’.⁶⁴ In 1963, one white resident complained of parties going on until 8:00 a.m., with ‘screaming, shouting, and obscene language’,⁶⁵ while another bemoaned a fall in the value of their property since Caribbean families had moved to her neighbourhood to throw parties which ‘go on until early hours’.⁶⁶ The following year, The Report of the Committee on Housing in Greater London stated that they had received complaints from white residents that ‘coloured people are frequently very noisy, and that they are given to late night parties’.⁶⁷ By 1967 local councillors and police forces had begun bringing

⁶⁰ *JOFFA*, November 1968, 4.

⁶¹ *Magnet: The Voice of the Afro-Asian Caribbean Peoples*, 13 March 1965—26 March 1965.

⁶² ‘The Big Big Sound System Splashdown’, *New Musical Express*, 21 February 1981.

⁶³ Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration, *Minutes of Evidence, Thursday, 12th December, 1968*, Session 1968-69, 79.

⁶⁴ United Kingdom, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 654 (1962).

⁶⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 31 July 1963.

⁶⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 20 November 1964.

⁶⁷ Cmnd. 2605 (1964).

noise metres to ‘trouble spots’ in an attempt to quell their presence, and drew on the provisions of the Noise Abatement Act 1960 in order to apply increasing pressure to these spaces.⁶⁸

Resent over the imposition of unwanted sensory experiences often, however, revealed other racialised emotional currents within white society, such as anxiety over the congregation of black bodies: ‘it is the noise that worries people. Also the crowds of coloured people who appear from nowhere like a small, invading Congolese army’.⁶⁹ Indissolubly hitched to these emotions are cultural and historical conceptions of race, and in particular the equation of whiteness with cleanliness and purity and blackness with dirt and pollution. A 1961 article in *The Times* epitomises the link between these emotions and ideational constructs when it wrote that the racial tensions swirling around Smethwick in Birmingham were ‘born out of thousands of late West Indian parties and hundreds of shabby immigrant front gardens’.⁷⁰ Articulating this link – and in one of the most apt historical instances of nominal determinism – MP Tom Iremonger drew the House of Commons’ attention to ‘the different ideas which many in immigrant communities have concerning nuisances, public and private, noise, sanitation, and so on ...’.⁷¹

On their own, these dynamics would likely have precipitated the reactionary rhetoric and draconian police crackdowns on migrant parties which were to come. The most important thread still needs, however, to be woven in. The association of these spaces with “vice” – prostitution, violence, drugs, and unlicensed alcohol – done perhaps more than anything to place these at the forefront of the agendas of policymakers and law enforcement. This discursive formation was driven largely by lurid, sensationalist stories in the national press. In 1961 *The People* ran a story of English girls enslaved by black migrants ‘who live off prostitutes’ earnings’ – an act which ‘does not come naturally to the English criminal’. The anecdotal example used in the story was of a girl of 15 sexually assaulted and pushed into prostitution

⁶⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1967.

⁶⁹ *The Times*, 21 January 1965.

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 5 October 1964.

⁷¹ United Kingdom, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 754 (1967).

after she was ‘invited to a party given by a crowd of Jamaicans’.⁷² By 1967 the association of blues parties with vice and moral depravity had been firmly set, and would continue throughout the 1970s and 1980s. That year in Walsall, police raided the party of Herbert Artwell, whose attendees accused the police of violence and planting cannabis on them. One man, who asked to see the police officer’s hands before searching him, was kicked and called a ‘smart guy’.⁷³ The same newspaper, in 1961, carried a story of a drunken knife fight between two Caribbean migrants and ‘a trail of blood stretching for 150 yards’ after both had attended a party.⁷⁴ Lord Wigg, reading out his correspondence with a white resident living near a regular blues spot in the House of Lords in 1968, succinctly articulated the relationship between blues parties, race, sexual and moral anxiety, and gendered ideals: ‘the man has a daughter and he is worried about the moral problems’.⁷⁵

Migrant parties and the police

Police began stepping up their harassment of these spaces in the 1970s at the same time that national media outlets began painting these spaces as dens of vice, attempting to cruelly invert the affective characteristics of safety and security that partygoers cultivated on dance floors. The attempts to shift emotional experience in blues parties toward precarity and violence was a key influence in producing feelings of resentment toward the police amongst black migrants and their children, and blues parties thus became key sites where the relationship between the police and black people was set and calcified for the following decades. British-Jamaican poet Linton Kwesi Johnson paints such a scene in his 1975 poem *Street 66*, set in a blues party ultimately raided by the police, and which hints at the strange coexistence of emotions in blues parties of the time. On the one hand, feelings of intimacy, warmth, companionship, and empowerment poke through (‘Weston did a skank and each man laugh and feeling irie’), and

⁷² *The People*, 8 October 1961.

⁷³ *Walsall Observer and South Staffordshire Chronicle*, 12 May 1967.

⁷⁴ *Walsall Observer and South Staffordshire Chronicle*, 24 November 1961.

⁷⁵ United Kingdom, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 289 (1968).

yet on the other increasingly militant and masculinised notions of resistance begin to assert themselves ('Any policeman come here will get some righteous, raasclot licks / Yeah mon, whole heapa licks').⁷⁶ This battle over the legitimacy of the blues and black cultural leisure spaces slots into the wider historical context of an increasingly repressive policing of Britain's black communities, with racial profiling and the provisions of the Vagrancy Act 1824 used in combination to harass and search black youths in public spaces in what became known as the "sus law". These were the key tactics used by the Metropolitan Police in 1981 when they launched *Operation Swamp 81*, a plainclothes stop-and-search campaign in Brixton which caused a lasting fracture in the relationship between the police and the black community.

We should also note another important factor in the decline of blues parties. Police harassment and brutality were not, in and of themselves, ever enough to prevent migrants and their children from constructing and participating in these key spaces of emotional expression and experience, and we should not accord to police harassment more efficacy than they are due. Another reason for the decline of blues parties in the later 1980s is that black migrants and black Britons gained a relative measure of access to leisure spaces: the "colour bar" of previous decades had if not disappeared, then at least declined. Promoters, venue owners, and venue security teams now worked under a growing common knowledge that explicit racial discrimination was no longer as culturally tolerable – and, more importantly for them, illegal. Although gatekeepers who still wished to practice exclusion could quite easily fabricate other, non-racial justifications, the penetration of black culture, in a creolised dynamic, into the heart of Britain's cultural symbols, texts, and artistic output was reaching a critical mass by late 1980s, to the point where it became impossible to deny them wholesale access to leisure institutions. A large generation of black Britons had emerged to claim their social birthrights. It was also the time of a great Americanising wave in British subculture, as reggae and its subgenres, and the cultural and emotional codes of the island from whence it came, lost ground to hip hop as the dominant cultural and emotional reference for young black Britons. As part of this shift, the blues party came to be seen by a new generation as an outmoded space of cultural and emotional expression.

⁷⁶ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread Beat An' Blood* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture, 1975), 19.

Throughout their lifespan, Caribbean migrant house and blues parties were historically-significant sites for manipulations participants' affective states. The dynamic of these manipulations – on an overarching level – worked in three important ways. Firstly, affective manipulations were geared toward the suspension or bracketing of undesirable feelings amongst partygoers, such as precarity and insecurity. Secondly, these manipulations were enacted in order to *achieve* certain, more desirable emotional states amongst participants such as safety, pride, and self-esteem. These were the dynamics which persisted as house parties were eclipsed by blues parties beginning in the late 1950s. However, with the advent of the blues an additional affective dynamic began to assert itself which was largely absent from earlier house parties: certain affective feelings, such as nostalgia and longing, feed back in to the very space of the party itself, conditioning the creation and reception of sensory experiences and patterns of consumption. Indissolubly tied to these affective dynamics is a shifting historical context, which provided the impetus for the creation of these dynamics and powerfully conditioned their evolution. The precarity of many migrants' arrivals and the structural racism they found within the housing market led to an acute amplification of certain cultural values amongst migrants, such as homeownership, propriety, and respectability, whilst the racist violence they faced led them to create autonomous cultural spaces where they might *feel* safe. As this migration flow matured in its adolescent years, the realisation amongst many that they were not returning fed back in to the space of the blues party, again shifting and altering its affective atmosphere. There is much more to be written about this topic, and we need to think and research deeply the impact that certain musical forms and spiritual movements, such as reggae, lovers rock, and Rastafarianism, had on these party spaces, along with the gendered affective codes embedded within them. This paper aims to be a portal for further discussion and research, laying down some key historiographical touchstones, rather than a destination in itself. It has shown that, even within a period and subject as historiographically-spotlighted as this, historical practitioners still have much work to do.

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