

Riots and the racial borderscape in Britain

In her blog piece Suzanne Hall discusses “Racial Borderscapes” in the context of the abhorrent anti-migrant, anti-Muslim, xenophobic riots across the UK in July and August. She raises questions around how these borders shape an anti-immigration environment, in which discriminatory racial violence occurs. She reflects on her own research collaborations on street economies in cities across the UK, reminding us that it remains pivotal that we invest our energies in engaging with migration as integral to our shared planetary future.

Who shapes a border? Who decides who is an “outsider”? How does the [UK’s ‘Hostile Environment’ policy](#) outlined in 2012, affect racist violence on the street today? The term “[borderscape](#)” captures the co-authored political and social practice of producing legal and everyday borders. “[Racial Borderscape](#)” points to how these borders shape an anti-immigration environment, in which discriminatory racial violence occurs. I introduce this term and ask these questions, in the context of the abhorrent anti-migrant, anti-Muslim, xenophobic riots across the UK in July and August. To begin with, I reflect back on my [research collaborations on street economies](#) between 2012 and 2017, where we explored the socio-economic life of streets in [Birmingham](#), [Bristol](#), [Bristol](#), [Leicester](#), [London](#) and [Manchester](#), shaped by those who had migrated to Britain. Our research revealed that the economic life of independent shops on these streets is connected to much wider systems of political and economic order, in which [unequal life chances](#) are produced. A question we raised was why certain individuals and groups – despite significantly varied occupations and migrant journeys – became positioned in shops in urban areas categorised as deprived.

The [making of these street economies](#) is complex and nuanced, but two [systemic features of discrimination](#) are important to highlight. Firstly, the majority of street proprietors we surveyed (over 500) were neither traders nor proprietors in the first instance. They entered into Britain with an array of skills, the majority with tertiary education, and had become street proprietors in cycles of economic recession and

redundancies. These cycles had disproportionately affected those officially designated as BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), conditioning [a shift into varied forms of casualised and/or self-employment](#). Their economic positioning is a story of an [unequal labour market](#) striated on ethnicised lines. Added to this economic history of [how labour is stratified and racialised in Britain](#), is compounded disinvestment in areas marked as deprived. The [austerity measures introduced in 2010 by the Conservative government](#), in response to the deficit induced by the global economic crisis of 2008, procured significant state cutbacks to local authority budgets and services. The authorised depletion of distributed public investment continued unabated, [exacerbating](#) a national landscape of profoundly uneven life chances.

Secondly, in tracing the street proprietors' journeys, it was evident how their migration paths had been differently shaped by historic international relations in which Britain had a distinctive role. From the extractive logics of empire and colony to sustained political interventionism, migration flows reveal the long durée of prevailing political economies, as much as cultural interdependencies. It was evident too, that significant aspects of street economies were tied to encounters with the border regime, whether in hosting services such as English as a Second Language courses, or legal services connected to migration. Streetlife was simultaneously convivial and unsettled, [the spectre of everyday migration control](#) never far from hearts and minds. At the time, tracing the brazen introduction of a "hostile immigration environment" through [2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts](#), electoral platforms and social media, was more than sobering. It has had volatile consequences for those targeted, and has become integral to the legitimisation of anti-migrant sentiment. In this space of political and social antagonisms, the pejorative determination of "the outsider" is pre-emptively marked on racialised and increasingly religious grounds.

I zoom out from the streets we researched, to reflect on the streets in which horrific anti-immigration and racist attacks are unfolding. Recent explanations of the heinous violence point to [the wider political environment](#) through which this ferocity is sustained. It is important to point to the recent election campaigns in the UK, in which intended rhetoric made shameful references, including to ["stop the boats"](#). It is important to point to the manipulation of thought authorised and sustained through far-right media activity, and ownership. As the streets in my research revealed, we must turn to face too, [to a long history of racist anti-immigration practices](#) sustained across the political spectrum.

In 2013, when the Immigration Bill circulated through the Houses of Parliament, [the then Labour MP John McDonnell described the policy as](#), “the most racist piece of legislation that this country has witnessed since the 1960s...aimed at setting up a regime of harassment for migrants”. Only six Labour MPs voted against the Bill, with the majority abstaining. The vote passed with 303 votes to 18. This is an enduring politics that strongly advocates for migration control. But where is the serious political recognition of how deeply interdependent lives and livelihoods in Britain are, on migration? This is not reducible to an economic calculus; it is about our mutual interdependencies that significantly shape our histories and futures. My street research was also immersed in the expansive practices of social and cultural crossings, which sustain the everyday life of imagination, care and recuperation in our local neighbourhoods.

We are entrenched in the pernicious politics of the racial borderscape; a bordering system that regulates and restricts who we think we are, and reduces how we think we might live together. The culprit is neither a singular leader nor a coherent group, and it will not be tempered with arresting individuals, nor electing a new party into power. This racial borderscape is a coagulation of varied forms of authority that problematise migration and demonise migrants. It develops through legal and commonplace vocabularies that designate the pejorative range of outsiders. It ushers in [a notion of citizenship not as right but a discretionary privilege](#) where citizenship itself is called into question, as brutally revealed in the [Windrush Scandal and protracted betrayal](#). Racial borderscapes are sustained [by polite and impolite debates in parliament](#), by governmental Acts and street acts, by grounded and global arrangements of exclusion. It promises a consignment to the prevalence of racist violence, fuelled by the harbingers of hatred. It remains pivotal that we invest our energies in engaging with migration as integral to our shared planetary future, embracing anti-racist commitments and our mutual interdependencies.

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