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Nihilism and urban multiculturalism in outer East London¹

Abstract

This paper discusses nihilism as it relates to contemporary urban multiculturalism in outer East London. It addresses how contemporary discourses on, and performances of, nihilism signal shifts in the constitution of urban multiculturalism. Attention is paid to acts of anti-sociability (and sociability) for what they reveal about contemporary urban re-arrangement, and in particular the re-formation of urban multiculturalism in a moment defined by globalisation, virtual communication, ethnic diversity and neoliberal marginalisation. Through addressing discourses on, and performances of, nihilism the overall argument of the paper is for a renewal of the terms on which we understand and engage with urban multiculturalism, and for an appreciation of how relations between class, race and culture have shifted since key texts on the subject were published.

Key words

East London, Youth, Multiculturalism, Nihilism, Ethnography, Neoliberalism

Introduction

On 12th August 2011 conservative historian David Starkey aired his now well-known pronouncement on the British 'riots':

There are two things about these riots. On the one hand they are completely superficial. Someone brilliantly put it there [in the audience] 'it's shopping with violence'; it's merely extended commercialism ... The other is that there has been a profound cultural change ... What has happened is a substantial section of the chavs you [Owen Jones] wrote about have become black, the whites

¹ I would like to sincerely thank Mussa Abdalla owner of Ice Films Entertainment for permission to use the images contained in this paper.

have become black; a particular sort of violent destructive nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion and black and white, boy and girl operate in this language together, this language that is wholly false, which is a Jamaican patois that's been intruded in England. And that's why so many of us have the sense of literally a foreign country (Starkey 2011).

While Starkey's assessment of young people as nihilistic was hardly new, his comments did raise important questions about how racialised and classed discourses on nihilism were shifting. Whereas the castings of civil disturbances as nihilistic had previously erased multi-ethnic participation to concentrate on black or Asian working-class young men (Alexander 2005; Solomos 2003), Starkey addressed its existence. He provided, from a white conservative and nationalist perspective, a window onto shifts in racialised discourse (Omi and Winant 1994:55; Fanon 1991:171). He mapped blackness onto multi-ethnic rioters to explain the nihilism of those summer nights. The working-class, racial and linguistic miscegenation apparent on his TV drew attention to the erosion of bourgeois English culture by a commercialised 'patois' he associated with rap music.

In this way, Starkey's comments on nihilism, to which we shall return, provided insight into the shifting framing of urban multiculturalism. This paper builds on this insight by analysing a series of discourses on, and performances of nihilism, that surrounded the release of the YouTube hip hop/grime video *Kill all a Dem* in outer East London, and by discussing what these revealed about the reformation of urban multiculturalism in that location.

To make this argument, the paper begins by locating itself in a tradition of sociological work on urban multiculturalism. It then addresses how nihilism as discourse and performance charts changes in urban multiculturalism, and how this analytic lens might be used to understand contemporary outer East London. A short methodology section outlines the multi-sited ethnographic approach adopted by the paper. The following substantive sections explore shifts in contemporary urban multiculturalism through addressing located discourses on, and performances of, nihilism. The conclusion

argues for a reappraisal of the relations between class, race and culture and for the importance of ethnography in unpicking the contemporary moment.

Urban multicultural

In British sociology the study of urban multiculturalism is principally associated with a body of work conducted in the 1980s and 1990s that explored changes in urban youth culture through addressing key post-war shifts. These shifts included post-colonial migration, the ethnic reconfiguration of urban society in a post-industrial context, and its mediation through diasporic forms of culture, such as music (Back 1994; Gilroy 2000). Early studies focused on the interplay between black (principally Jamaican) and white working-class youth cultures exploring how cultural syncretisms were formed (Hebdige 1987; Hewitt 1986; Jones 1988). They addressed how struggles against racism and class oppression were mobilised together, and how black and white styles were borrowed and shared to make sense of young peoples' urban realities. Later work by Harris developed this analysis by exploring the local and diasporic connections maintained by British Asian young people (Harris 2006). Back's concept of 'neighbourhood nationalism' situated these syncretisms in urban space and addressed how new territorial solidarities cut across supposed racial divides (Back 1994).

Taken together, these studies of urban multiculturalism were concerned with: the 'urban' as a space in which culture is constituted; 'culture' as everyday, artistic and expressive; and, 'multi' as the interface of these creative and situated dynamics with the racial re-registering of multi-ethnic Britain. These largely ethnographic works were, then, indispensable for understanding the re-composition of urban multiculturalism and for challenging naive and racist assumptions about urban life. However, their insights do not exist in perpetuity. In contemporary outer East London, urban culture has passed through two additional decades of syncretism and class and racial fractures are marked in different ways. Global youth culture has expanded, 'super-diverse' demographics are more common and virtual and digital media has reshaped the experience of territoriality.

This paper is concerned with these shifts. In order to explore them it employs the conceptual language of performativity (Butler 1988; Gilroy 1993). Building on the concerns of the studies above, performativity allows the paper to engage with the ways in which urban multiculturalism has continued to change. As will be demonstrated, it allows the paper to address how discourses on, and performances of, nihilism in outer East London were acted out from certain racialised and classed socio-historical scripts (Butler 1988), how these scripts were constituted in the context of diaspora (Gilroy 1993), and how these acts 'cited' and exceeded what came before (Derrida 1976).

Discourses on, and performance of, nihilism

To address these, it is necessary to foreground the sociological histories of which they were part. With regards to discourse, the framing of urban young people as nihilistic is not new. Dominant discourses on nihilism in Britain can be traced back to Conservative MP, Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech (1969)² which portrayed black working class youth people in the UK as apolitical, anti-social and detached from mainstream British society (Gilroy 1987).³ David Starkey's citation of Powell to make sense of the 2011 'riots' demonstrated how discourses on nihilism are also shifting. Starkey adapts Powell's assessment of black and working class youth in the late 1960s to frame multi-racial and syncretic urban formations in 2011, and to narrate neoliberal class distinctions through consumption practices, referred to as "shopping with violence".

To understand what performances of nihilism might say about contemporary urban multiculturalism in outer East London (in relation to discourse) it is necessary to turn, with the requisite contextual caution, to US debates. Cornel West and bell hooks'

² Powell's assessment of nihilism was itself a citation of US white supremacist discourses on 'black ghettos' and the 1967 'race riots' (James 1993:261).

³ Through the 1970s and 1980s young black people, and signifiers of black culture – including carnival, dancehall, house/blues parties and sound systems – were positioned as nihilistic (Gilroy 1987). While these different moments had distinct discursive framings and contexts, the cumulative effect was to entrench racialised anti-sociality and detachment to such an extent that they often obfuscated the representation of black life and experience in any other form (Gilroy 2002 [1987]:130).

discussions of black America are invaluable for opening up this area of analysis. Drawing on Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1968), West and hooks address nihilism in black America for what it says about the ironic and destructive condition of a racist neoliberal society. West and hooks argue that performances of nihilism arise alongside society's dominant discourses of racial and class oppression. Addressing nihilism as a performance of anti-sociability and detachment peculiar to neoliberal capitalist and racist society, West explores how the lives of poor black Americans become nihilistic as hope and freedom are erased by these same forces (West 1994; West 1981). Hooks addresses how the nihilistic performances of US hip hop musicians are constituted alongside white-supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal discourses. She shows how these performances reveal the struggles of young working-class black men to win back masculinity from white America's sexualisation and emasculation of the black body. Performances of nihilism, in this sense, reveal the absence of former utopias of freedom and the ironic and destructive reproduction of patriarchal capitalism and racism by adhering black bodies to money, misogyny, detachment and anti-sociability (hooks 2004).

In these ways, West and hooks signal how performances of nihilism in black America coexist with discursive forms of oppression, and how they are constitutive of a racially ordered, neoliberal-capitalist society. Given the proliferation of YouTube performances of nihilism in outer East London, it is pertinent to also ask what these also reveal about the constitution of race, class, urban multiculturalism and neoliberal marginalisation in that location.

Urban multiculturalism and nihilism in outer East London

Building on the above, this paper argues that discourses on, and performances of, nihilism are indeed useful for understanding contemporary urban culture in neoliberal outer East London. However, London is not Los Angeles and for this reason the paper requires grounding in the appropriate context.

The materials that feed into this paper come from ethnographic fieldwork conducted around Leyham Youth Club between 2008 and 2010. Leyham Youth Club is located in the London Borough of Newham, on the edge of a park. In addition to a large recreational space, the building had three very popular but very virus-ridden computers. I worked as a youth worker cum researcher in these spaces. The discourses and performances addressed in this paper pertained to the socio-historical context of Leyham Youth Club and the surrounding area. The population of young people living around and attending the youth club were testament to the location's history of migration of movement, and this had implications for the forms of syncretism and fixity that will be addressed below. From the colonial period onwards, people from all over the UK and world arrived in Newham as industrial labourers, and as merchant and military naval crews. These were followed by post-colonial migrants, refugees and people from neighbouring boroughs looking for cheaper housing. Consequently, young people I worked with had Eastern European but also Irish, Scottish, Greek, English and Romany migratory histories. Some were black and Asian with African, Caribbean and south Asian pasts. Others had ancestry in Latin America, and many were 'mixed' and could compile multiple national histories within two generations. Most were also born and brought up in the borough. These demographics did not preclude the performance of autochthonous belonging (Geschiere 2009; James 2014; Yuval-Davis 2012).

These dimensions of urban multiculturalism, overlapped with specific configurations of class and neoliberal marginalisation that also feature in the discourses and performances this paper addresses. In terms of class, Newham is a historically working-class borough. The majority of young people discussed in this paper came from low-income families and some experienced intense poverty. This was part of longer history of post-industrial and neoliberal rupture. The 24,000 job losses between 1966 and 1976 (Canning Town Community Development Project 1976), the decline of labour networks and neighbourly 'slum' architectures, 53.9 per cent economic inactivity among young people (LBN 2010:44), and the highest public spending cuts in London (BBC 2010) informed their everyday acts.

Methodology

To explore nihilism and urban multiculturalism in this context, the research employed a range of ethnographic techniques. Starting life as a traditional ethnography, the principle method was participant observation. As with other studies (Back 1994; Hall 2012; Nayak 2003), participant observation provided access to the fabric of everyday life, and the malleability to respond to the issues important to young people located there (Willis and Trondman 2002). This entailed spending two or three afternoons and evenings a week at the youth club over a period of two years.

During this time, I conducted interviews with young people and youth workers to deepen my knowledge of histories and events. I also developed a range of participant methods. Given the intractability of youth people from new media (Beer 2013) some methods included digital video making. These provided sites at which the interface of physical and virtual encounters could be listened to (Madianou and Miller 2013; Murthy 2011). I also collected YouTube videos and message postings that had noticeable bearings on the physical reality of the youth club, although this did not entail participation in online forums, or the systematic gathering of digital communications.⁴ Online music videos were particularly interesting in this regard as they provided a means of addressing how the performances of nihilism published on YouTube related to the physical reality of Leyham – something made possible by the recent affordability and proliferation of digital technologies in that location (Murthy 2008).

In terms of analysis, the sonic, lyrical and visual dimensions of the video were explored, in relation to the performance, as systems of representation (Hall 1997). The forms of meaning they conveyed were thematically interpreted in the context of the wider ethnography, and in relation to their sonic, lyrical and visual histories. That is, they were addressed as related collections of symbols in different mediums (Dicks et al.

⁴ I recognise that in hindsight closer attention to the intertwining of the virtual and physical, rather than a privileging of the physical, could have provided additional avenues of enquiry.

2005) that were performed in, and to make sense of, the socio-historical context of outer East London as connected to elsewhere.

Through these forms of reflexive practice and analysis, a multi-sited ethnography developed. This paper is testament to that approach. As the research moved to explore various trajectories, the physical geographies of young people were connected to other temporal and virtual sites (Marcus 1998). In this context, the youth club and the young people acted as vehicles of travel and displacement as well as a site of fixity. Together this approach, through far from tidy, provided insight into some of the messy, multiple and interrelated sites at which contemporary urban multiculturalism is made in outer East London (Alexander 2003).

'They're looking at rappers', and other discourses on *Kill all a*

Dem

Having foregrounded the central premises, the rest of this paper analyses the discourses on, and performances of, nihilism that surrounded the release of the grime music video *Kill all a Dem*. As noted, it does so to gain insight into shifts in contemporary urban multiculturalism in outer East London. The analysis begins with a presentation of the video and discussion of its reception at Leyham Youth Club. This discussion pays particular attention to the discourses youth workers used to frame the communication. It then moves to interrogate the performance itself.

Unbeknown to the youth workers or me, *Kill all a Dem* was made in the summer of 2010 in the area surrounding Leyham Youth Club. As latterly revealed in a *Behind the Scenes* documentary, large numbers of the young people from the youth club congregated that summer at sites in the local area to provide backing-singing and cameos for the final production. Released at the beginning of 2011, the youth workers and I became aware of the video when it entered the youth club's back lobby via its partially functioning computer terminals.

Like Professor Green's *Upper Clapton Dance* (2009), Sway's *Little Derek* (2006), No Lay's *Unorthodox Daughter* (2008) and many smaller productions, *Kill all a Dem* was steeped in the London philosophy of gritty (grimy) realism (Bramwell 2012) (see figures one to four). Shot in black and white it contained familiar images of pitbull cross-breeds, street scenes, hand-break turns and shooting gestures. Most of the video was taken up with Upcoming Movement (three white front-men from the local area) rapping in front of other young men and few women (many of whom attended the youth club). The video was shot by local black and Asian filmmakers Hustler and Ice and had simple post-production techniques added to highlight the colour of the bandana – the sign of territorial conflict at the centre of the video's performance of nihilism.

This 'stylized urban realism' (Zuberi 2010:179) was complemented by the music and lyrics. As the video ran, the slow, creeping and orchestral music, with its air of suspense and premonition, played into the youth club. The track opened with three haunting notes played on a synthesised piano. Mixing machinic with verbal traditions, the lyrics played through the nihilistic scene of stabbing someone from a rival area, bagging them up and taking them to Epping Forest – resting place of unmarked graves. Verse after verse, the track imagined scenarios of extreme physical violence – stabbing, shooting and death. The violence appeared senseless, the commentary functional and without emotion. The realism of the drama complemented the flow. As with Giggs' track *Talking the Hardest* (2009), choreographic attention was paid to the theatre of conflict – gun drawn, heads turned and the opposition confronted. Violence was presented as the necessary response to any 'cats' who 'slipped', into Leyham's 'endz'. Every verse came back to the chorus 'kill all a dem'.



Figure One: Still from 'Kill all a Dem' – pitbull crossbreed (Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011a)



Figure Two: Still from 'Kill all a Dem' – bandana and hood (Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011a)



Figure Three: Still from 'Kill all a Dem' – front man and shooting gestures from backing group (Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011a)



Figure Four: Still from 'Kill all a Dem' – handbrake turn (Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011a)

Arriving at the youth club, this theatre of nihilism was enthusiastically received by the young people. Over two evenings, they busily shared the video over Facebook with 'friends' in the borough and elsewhere. Despite my attempts to elicit spoken explanations, there was little verbal discussion of these engagements and much passed into the ether. However, the young people's enthusiastic online activities and surrounding sonic and kinetic energy, highlighted the importance of the video as a 'common sense' and resonant communication. In the absence of verbal explanations, the reasons for this are suggested in the analysis of the performance below.

The distinction between the young people's enthusiasm, and youth workers' negative evaluation of the video was marked, and indeed this response was scripted into the video itself. Unlike the young people, the youth workers were forthcoming in their spoken analysis of the performance. Negative assessments of the video drew on personal histories and local contexts but also on wider dominant discourses (elaborated above) in which marginalised urban young people have been framed as nihilistic.

For my own part, I initially mocked the video and in so doing drew on bourgeois discourses to frame working-class art as low culture. This revealed my classed privilege and my ignorance of local forms of expression. Jane (a sessional youth worker) framed the video against narratives of upward mobility and thereby adapted neoliberal discourses on working-class detachment and middle-class necessity to accord with her personal and professional orientations.

Jane was in her early thirties and lived in a flat in South East London, which she found preferable to living in Newham. She was a devout Christian and placed significant importance on the family and community. Looking for further education and employment she had come to the area from middle-class Ghana. She was a teaching assistant and worked in the youth club for extra money. Both were low paid jobs but provided careers she could morally invest in. They also provided a professional environment that contributed to her personal ideas of 'aspiration' – a category widely used in neoliberal education and youth work to divide the figure of the white middle-

class, educated-professional-consumer from working-class and racialised figures of failure. In this context, she framed the video as nihilistic because it communicated a foreclosed white middle-class horizon and therefore also the absence of appropriate social institutions.

Other youth workers made sense of the nihilistic performance through discourses on young people's detachment from traditional working class culture. Tessa had a Scottish and English family history, had been born and brought up in the local area and often told stories of her East End's 'golden era'. She equated this era with a strong local community, whiteness and honourable working-class masculine behaviour. Rather than seeing the video's performance of masculinity and informal earning (represented in the video as 'the hustle') as developments of earlier notions of honour and graft, it provided evidence of the decline of her parent culture. Rather than represent continuity with the community she had loved and lost, *Kill all a Dem's* embrace of hip hop consumer culture communicated the evaporation of her past.

Ryan had recently joined the sessional worker pool at Leyham. Although to some extent, sharing narratives of decline and loss that permeated the local area, as a young black man who had experienced street racism growing up in Newham he did not share nostalgias for whiter pasts. Ryan told me how the nihilism communicated in *Kill all a Dem* was demonstrative of the loss of other utopias, in particular the alternative futures offered by black political figures and US counter culture groups, such as the Bloods and Crips. Discussing *Kill all a Dem* he said, 'I think they're looking at rappers. There is no positive role models no more...' In this way, he identified a shift from political to apolitical youth culture. He related this to global hip hop's promotion of individual and moneyed ways of life. He explained how 'girls' were like 'wow look at this guy. He's got chains, he's got money', and how young boys reacted by 'chang[ing their] image, acting up'. However, Ryan did not see this way of living as the preserve of black people. In the context of hip hop's ubiquity and Newham's multi-ethnic youth population, he explained 'it affects white people too'. In these ways, Ryan assessed the glorification of money and commercialisation of masculine violence as codes open to

black and white young people. Blackness was not attached to black bodies but existed symbolically to make sense of everyday life (Nayak 2006).

Having arrived at the youth club via its partially functioning computer terminals, these various assessments of *Kill all a Dem* showed how racialised and classed discourses on nihilism were diasporic and situated, and how they were shifting and polysemic. In the context of neoliberal Newham, post-war discourses on nihilism were cited to make sense of middle-class concerns for failing 'aspirations' and working-class concerns for the erosion of community by consumer capitalism and global hip hop. In the context of super-diversity and global of hip hop, white bourgeois discourses on black youth culture were cited by a black and middle-class Ghanaian youth worker to explain the absence of whitened neoliberal progress, by a white and working class youth worker as evidence of working class decline, and by a black and British youth worker to address the dearth of alternative black utopias available to black and white young people. While the youth workers' discourses on nihilism traced older assessments of black culture their framings of the videos as nihilistic corresponded to a local context that was constituted through global youth culture, neoliberal marginalisation, migration and ethnic diversity. The various narratives revealed the youth workers' differentiated position in this matrix and also their common locationality.

Performances of nihilism in *Kill all a Dem*

While illuminating shifting discourses on nihilism and urban multiculturalism, these responses to the video only told part of the story, and to more fully address the relationship between nihilism and multiculturalism, it was necessary to open up the analysis to other sites, and in particular to an interrogation of the performance itself. Understanding the video as performance provided the possibility for thinking about the ways in which discourse and performance were constituted together, and in the absence of spoken assessments from young people, for exploring the grounded commentary the performance provided on everyday life.

The performance of *Kill all a Dem* told a revealing story of urban multiculturalism that was locally rooted and connected to elsewhere. As with its junglist and grime forerunners, the hanging instrumental, the haunting synthesised notes and the heart-beat drum could be heard as responses to the urban marginality, anti-sociality, surveillance and police harassment experienced by the young people (Beaumont-Thomas and Natty 2013; Reynolds 1998:354). The vernacular, 'Crime pays so I gotta do it part time, make a hustle a wonder like Stevie', cited Motown and hip hop's commercialised pursuit of money to address alternative work strategies (informal earning and low-level criminality) historically taken up by marginalised young people in the area (Hobbs 1988). However, it was through territoriality that the performance of nihilism was most clearly articulated, and recalling Back's analysis of 'neighbourhood nationalism' (Back 1994), it was through this means that shifts in outer East London urban multiculturalism could be best ascertained.

The performance of territorial nihilism in *Kill all a Dem* opened a window onto the grounded re-constitution of urban multiculturalism at a time of global hip hop, re-formed racialised and classed relations, digital technology, virtual communication and neoliberal society. With respect to global hip hop (as with the wider genre of grime) *Kill all a Dem* is replete with references to US rap territoriality (Zuberi 2010). The US 'hood is found in the producers' names 'Hustler and Ice' – a reference to Ice-T's Los Angeles based film, *New Jack City*. They are also communicated through the use of bandanas to signify territory: 'grey bandanas [mark] the territory'. These are used alongside the proliferation of physical landmarks – the tube station, park, roads, signposts, the disused railway line and the young people themselves – which draw attention to the post-code rivalry to which the performance of nihilism is directly addressed (see figures five and six).

These symbols make sense of territorial negotiations with their own racial and classed histories – specifically the rivalry between Leyham and southerly neighbour Millfield (an area of cheaper housing that has long-served as a landing spot for poorer migrants in the borough). This rivalry can be traced back to boundaries defined by industrial-era

kinship networks, pubs and labour groupings (Downes 1966:201), kept alive in contemporary Newham through tit-for-tat retaliations and incursions referred to as 'slipping'. These contemporary disputes were also racialised, and the performance of inter-post-code conflict was inseparable from the ways in which autochthonous Leyham youth constructed themselves by casting Millfield's black African, migrant and refugee populations as illegitimate strangers (James 2014).

In this way, the performance of *Kill all a Dem* cited the nihilist symbolism of US commercial hip hop to make sense of local racial and territorial relations with their own histories. It cited post-slavery codes in a post-colonial context to communicate working class turf rivalries, autochthonous belonging and anti-immigrant racisms.



*Figure Five: Still from 'Kill all a Dem' – Upcoming Movement with territorial bandanas
(Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011a)*



Figure Six: Still from 'Kill all a Dem' – road signs marking the territory (Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011a)

These performances of nihilism also drew attention to the reassembling of urban multiculturalism between virtual and physical realities. Launched on YouTube at the beginning of 2011, Upcoming Movement's performance of nihilism did not only unfold onto a physical landscape but also onto a virtual space with multiple possible horizons, interlocutors and social contexts (Sharma 2013). This demanded a reappraisal of its connection to everyday life, and its relationship to the analogue and physical dimensions of time and place explored in earlier accounts of urban multiculturalism. Upcoming Movement's use of YouTube fractured the temporal and spatial certainties of physical 'neighbourhood nationalisms'. Extending the disjunctive possibilities of the pirate radio station (Fuller 2005:50; Goodman 2009:32), their nihilistic communication opened onto a multiplicity of horizons laden with uncertainties and ambiguities.

When Upcoming Movement's claim, 'if I catch your mandem [groups of men] slippin', they will get beat-down so severe' – was released on YouTube it became open to

multiple reinterpretations. The unpredictability of the utterance became apparent through the ensuing dialogues it generated. Inflected with prison and Jamaican vernaculars, a small number of YouTube users posted comments under the video to test the group's commitment to violence.

'lol man talkin bowt shankin [stabbing] bowt shankin.
neva shanked someone but been shanked, dnt fink u know wat its
like kid, and despite man stickin blade in me he looked horrified all
u fannies r pussies mate.
where u from u goats, look like faggots, 60 youngens wid some fat
ass prick gimp.'

'wat do u kno gangsters cum 2 da blocs an get duppied⁵ [beaten up]
sn u fat shit.'

'This is awful. i would duppy all 3 of you who jumped on this track. on
1 riddim [rhythm]'

In addition to communicating their diasporic formation, the comments used digital media shorthands to call into question the veracity of the young people's claim. They mocked their style as unconvincing and slated their musical ability. They ridiculed the physical capacity of the young men to carry out their virtual assertions, questioned their experience of real world confrontation and specified a physical location to settle the score (outside the local McDonalds).⁶ As the comments were posted, those associated with the video became worried about the physical fall-out of their pronouncement and the owner of the YouTube channel deleted the more aggressive retorts.

The numerous social contexts and times in which these responses could have been made, shifted a local rivalry with a particular history into a dialogue that was decontextualised and deterritorialised from its physical location. Routing the post-code through the Internet created a complex assemblage of possibilities for Upcoming

⁵ Jamaican vernacular meaning 'ghost' or 'spirit'.

⁶ This comment was deleted before I could copy it.

Movement's nihilistic outing. The virtual had generated its own materiality and its uncertain possibilities became inseparable from the violence of the 'real' world (Odin 1997; Sharma 2013).

These racialised and territorial acts of nihilism, in their virtual and physical manifestations, could not be understood aside from the workings of neoliberal marginalisation in the area. As noted above, Newham's post-industrial period saw the decimation of social and labour structures followed by persistent unemployment and wide-spread deprivation. The neoliberal solution to this structural disadvantage was individual projects of self-interest and the promise of consumer freedoms (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001:23; Winlow and Hall 2006:8). Indeed, these values were imbricated into the reforming physical landscape Upcoming Movement grew up in. The towers of Canary Wharf and Westfield Shopping Centre's were a constant reminder to the young people of their inadequacies, and of the instability of their urban existence, in this regard. These socio-economic ruptures left many young people around Leyham youth club with a sense of absent agency, and drawing on mythologies of working class life, a simultaneous desire for permanence and community. Inter-post-code violence and racialised autochthony were inseparable from these social conditions. In the absence of alternative narratives of working class or cosmopolitan solidarity they ironically reinforced the destructive appetites of neoliberal society.

In this way, the performance of post-code rivalries in outer East London cited the nihilism of black America to ironically and destructively reproduce the racial and classed injustices of neoliberalism in outer East London. It was an account of absent agency reclaimed against the outsider, and missing working-class solidarity substituted by sharp-elbowed racialised introspection. Through *Kill all a Dem* the nihilism of black America was cited virtually and physically to mask the injustices of a post-colonial and neoliberal landscape that entrenched marginality through making everyday and lived its territorial registers of belonging and otherness.

The sociable act of killing all a dem

However, *Kill all a Dem's* virtual dialogue did not only call into question physical analyses of urban multiculturalism but also complicated the assessment of the video as racialised anti-sociability. In this sense, while the performance of nihilism was constituted in the neoliberal matrix it also exceeded it.⁷

At a mundane level, the uncertainties that sprang from the virtual dialogues revealed the protagonists' discomfort with inter-post-code violence. Here the performance of nihilism was revealed as more a theatre of nihilism, than a faithful commitment to lived anti-sociability. This was instructive of the banality of violence that permeates neoliberal youth culture, its imbrication in everyday acts but also its dramaturgical qualities.

This ambivalent relationship with all-out anti-sociability was further supported by the release of a *Behind the Scenes* video that showed the 'making of' what became the act. Using cuts from UK funky and Swiss Albanian, UK and US hip hop, which again attested to the global-diasporic phenomena of the performance, *Behind the Scenes* provided an upbeat soundtrack and colour video that departed from the grimy realism of its predecessor. The screenplay showed the everyday humanity of the protagonists behind the façade. It shows the front-people getting the verses wrong, young people smiling at each other, and winding each other up, and the producers practicing camera angles to generate the desired videographic effects. Rather than living in a permanent state of anti-sociability, *Behind the Scenes* showed that the nihilistic performance entailed near and far collaborations and rehearsals to achieve a convincing message.

⁷ In her work on the *Asian Gang*, Alexander has shown how racialised and classed young people, are constituted alongside their stereotypes, and how they never fit them. They are always much more, or much less than their account in dominant discourse (Alexander 2000).



Figure Eight: Still from 'Behind the Scenes' (Ice Films Entertainment et al. 2011b)

This commitment to collaboration focused attention on the performances underlying digital dialogues. In addition to being a theatre of nihilism, *Kill all a Dem* showed young people freestyling over Nocturnal's remix (2009) of DVA aka Scratcha's (Rinse FM and East London artist) instrumental called *Kill All Ah Dem* (2010), an instrumental not unique and tonally similar to Wiley's *The Matrix Instrumental* (2010 [2001-2006]) and Ruff Sqwads' *Tings in Boots* (Ruff Sqwad 2003). As with *The Matrix Instrumental* and *Tings in Boots*, Scratcha's version of *Kill All Ah Dem* was made to be shared and remixed, and through its digitisation and proliferation over YouTube had been covered by artists including Dollar da Dustman (2011), Tinie Tempah (2010) and numerous less familiar names.

Recalling earlier instances of technologically mediated sociability,⁸ Upcoming Movement used pixels, digitalised sound and the mobile phone to advance these open

⁸ The capacity of the 33-rpm 'long play' record allowed for dub tracks to be placed on the B-side of vinyl pressings, enabling artists to freestyle over shared instrumentals and create new music from old. Widely

ethics. Just as their predecessors adapted relatively inexpensive and ubiquitous analogue technologies to communicative and sociable ends so too did Upcoming Movement use digital technology. The video's cinematography was further evidence of this underlying ethics. Shot at face height, *Kill all a Dem* is faithful to a genre of grime videos captured on mobile phones for dialogue over YouTube (see for example Giggs's early video *Talking the Hardest* (2009)). These extended stylistically from a longer trajectory of amateur hip hop videos such as those released by London Possee in the late eighties and early nineties (Muggs 2013:10).

These dialogues also called into questions the racialised communitarianism that the video also promoted. In making the video, white, black and Asian young people of different migratory histories worked together. Through their digital and virtual dialogues, they co-operated with musicians in other post-codes and countries to communicate their autochthonous claim to Leyham's earth.

That is to say, *Kill all a Dem's* imagery was grounded in a low-tech, highly portable digital art that has collaboration as its organising ethics and aesthetics. At the same time as it communicated nihilism, it was evidence of the perseverance, and digital relocation of the urban paradox – the existence of intense collaboration alongside conflict (Back 1994). The video's nihilistic communications were founded in openness and through syncretism. Its racialised anti-sociability was underwritten by a diasporic sociability mediated through cheap and ubiquitous digital technology.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how performances of, and discourses on, nihilism in outer East London highlighted shifts in urban multiculturalism. An initial discussion revealed how discourses on nihilism operated over polysemic and shifting narratives of race and class in a context of neoliberalism, globalisation and ethnic diversity. Through the

available and inexpensive turntables facilitated the borrowing, mixing and cutting together of different tracks into new pieces of music (Back 1994:191; Gilroy 2002 [1987]:285).

analyses of the video *Kill all a Dem*, it showed how the performance of nihilism drew attention to shifting racialised terrains in a marginalised and ethnically diverse location, and to how digital and virtual circuitries were entangled with the analogue and physical dimensions of the performance. It discussed how the performance of nihilism masked a landscape of racialised and classed marginalisation, connected to but distinct from its US interlocutors; and, how despite its aggressive theatre, it continued to operate through the ethics of sociability.

To end, it is important to note that these discursive and performative movements all necessitate the reinvigoration and reappraisal of urban multiculturalism. The shifts between black resistance against racism and white resistance against class alienation – reliant on Marxian paradigms of resistance and hegemony, and relatively stable (although fluid) relations between race and culture – no longer hold as they once did. Accounted for by two decades of additional citations, the terrains of analysis have shifted again. In the last twenty years, baggy jeans, hooded tops, break beats and urban vernaculars have become mainstream, even passé. In addition, contemporary Newham does not fully pertain to prior post-colonial racial categories and accompanying aesthetics. This does not mean that ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘brown’ are no longer powerful biopolitical signifiers or that class has ceased to matter; rather that multiculturalism in super-diverse outer East London has continued to slip its racialised and classed anchors, and continued to disrupt how we must understand its relationship to the body. It remains the case that ‘culture is not a fixed and impermeable feature of social relations’ and that its ‘forms change, develop, combine and are dispersed into historical process’ (Gilroy 1987:294).

This paper has attended to the globalisation and commercialisation of formerly outlaw US urban culture, but also to the neoliberal racial and classed formations through which urban multiculturalism is constituted contemporaneously in outer East London. These neoliberal formations are diasporic in that they draw attention to trajectories connecting US, UK, Jamaican and Swiss Albanian youth culture, but they are also contextually and temporally specific. The citation of British urban multiculturalism in this

context pays attention to the historic development of neoliberal marginalisation and racialisation in particular UK locations. The performance of nihilism in this diasporic scenario tells a located story of anti-sociability, individualism and racialised neo-communitarianism as part of the tale of urban multiculturalism at this neoliberal moment. Unlike prior studies, this is not only communicated in relation to the physical world, but also in relation to the virtual. The intertwining of physical and virtual acts extends the scope, speed and uncertainties of the diasporic encounter, which in turn reforms the relationship between multiculturalism and urban space. It is also in this diasporic scenario that we need to understand the shifting forms of sociability that underwrite the nihilism of the neoliberal moment. Building on what came before, the sociability of analogue multiculturalism finds new horizons in digital and virtual realms.

Returning to David Starkey, it is precisely in this way that nihilism in urban culture should be re-framed. Performances of nihilism in urban culture are not naive expressions of an anti-social black culture by a multi-ethnic population, or simply the conjoint manifestation of detached criminality by working-class consumerist youth. Rather, in the context of outer East London, nihilism in urban multiculturalism (as discourse and performance) is constituted by, and constitutive of, the ironies and destructive conditions of neoliberal marginalisation, just as it is also the site at which syncretism and urban sociabilities are transformed at a time of global hip hop, virtual communication, digital technology and racial and class reformation.

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