

Why Mapping Black Lives Matters

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Race has been a constant point of intersection between cartography and demography since late Victorian times when developing the new field of anthropometrics.¹ Using mapping techniques to visualise the spatial distribution and concentration of populations defined in terms of race or ethnicity, and correlating the result with a variety of socio-economic factors has been the bread and butter of social cartography since the subject's inception. I say race *or* ethnicity, but in fact the profiles that have been constructed under this rubric have systematically conflated the two. This conflation is as central to contemporary biopolitics as it is to the identity politics which has arisen to challenge its naturalising assumptions. The physical characteristics of populations have not only been invested with moral propensities, whether good or bad, but entangled with factors of language, culture and history in a way which has effectively racialised them as forming a quasi-biological heritage. For example, it has become routine in public discourse to speak of Black or white 'racial identities' as if these were distinct personal genealogies, implicating their bearers existentially in particular histories of racism, either as victims or oppressors. In the process the multiple dimensions of social identity are reduced to a single iterative instance with a consequent impoverishment of representation. This may sometimes be a price worth paying, for personal and/or political reason.

Cartography has played a key role in spatializing and further reifying such essentialist constructions. By definition maps define territories and, as such can enable spatial identities to become racial identities. To the 'one drop' blood rule of racial categorisation – allocating anyone who has even the slightest element of consanguinity in their ancestry to a shared 'race', maps have added the *one spot rule* which identifies particular areas in terms of their racial/ethnic profile. Red lining maps used by real estate and civic authorities to profile residential areas in USA cities effectively ghettoised Black people by denying them access to many essential services, while at the same time reserving these same services for white areas. (see figure 1).

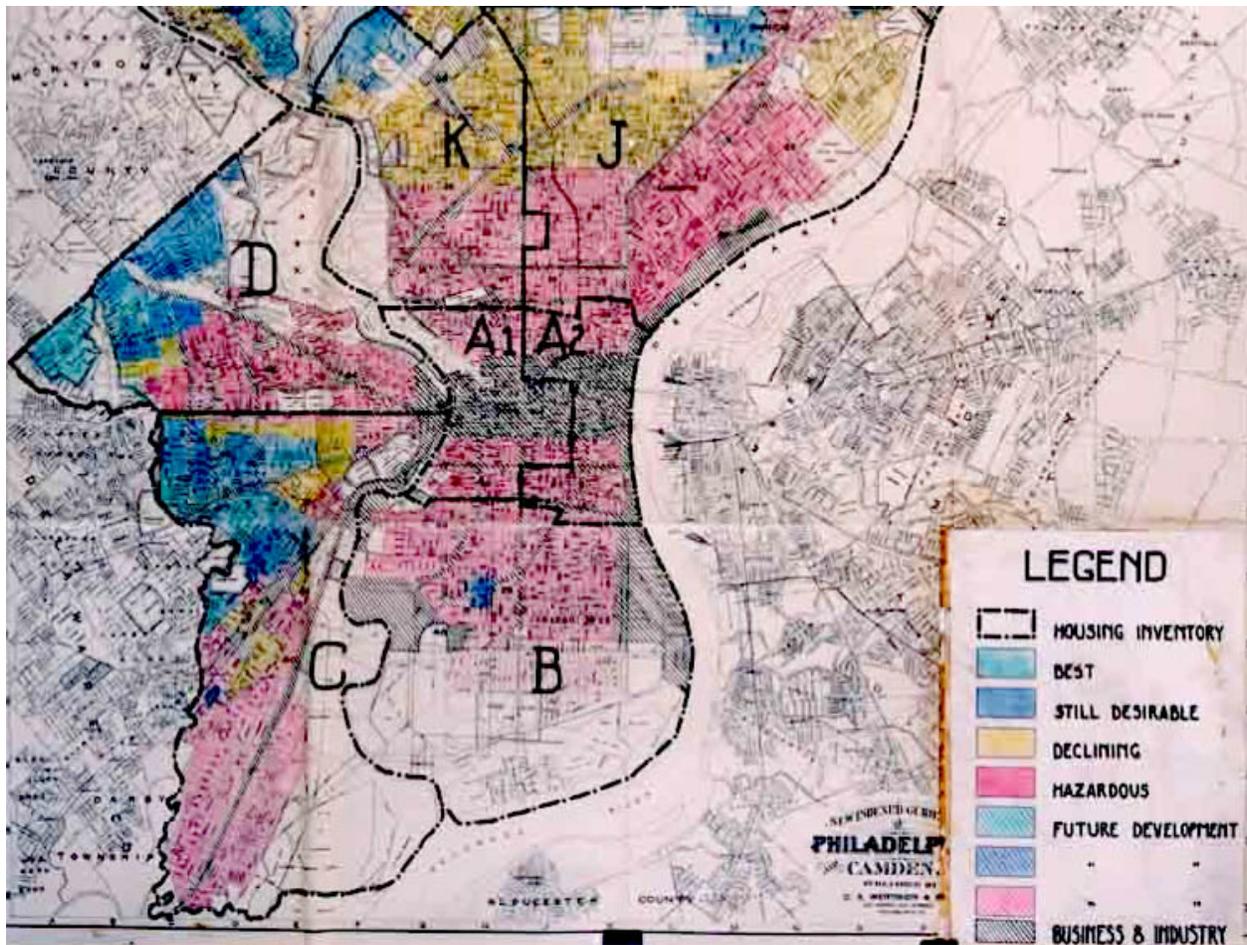
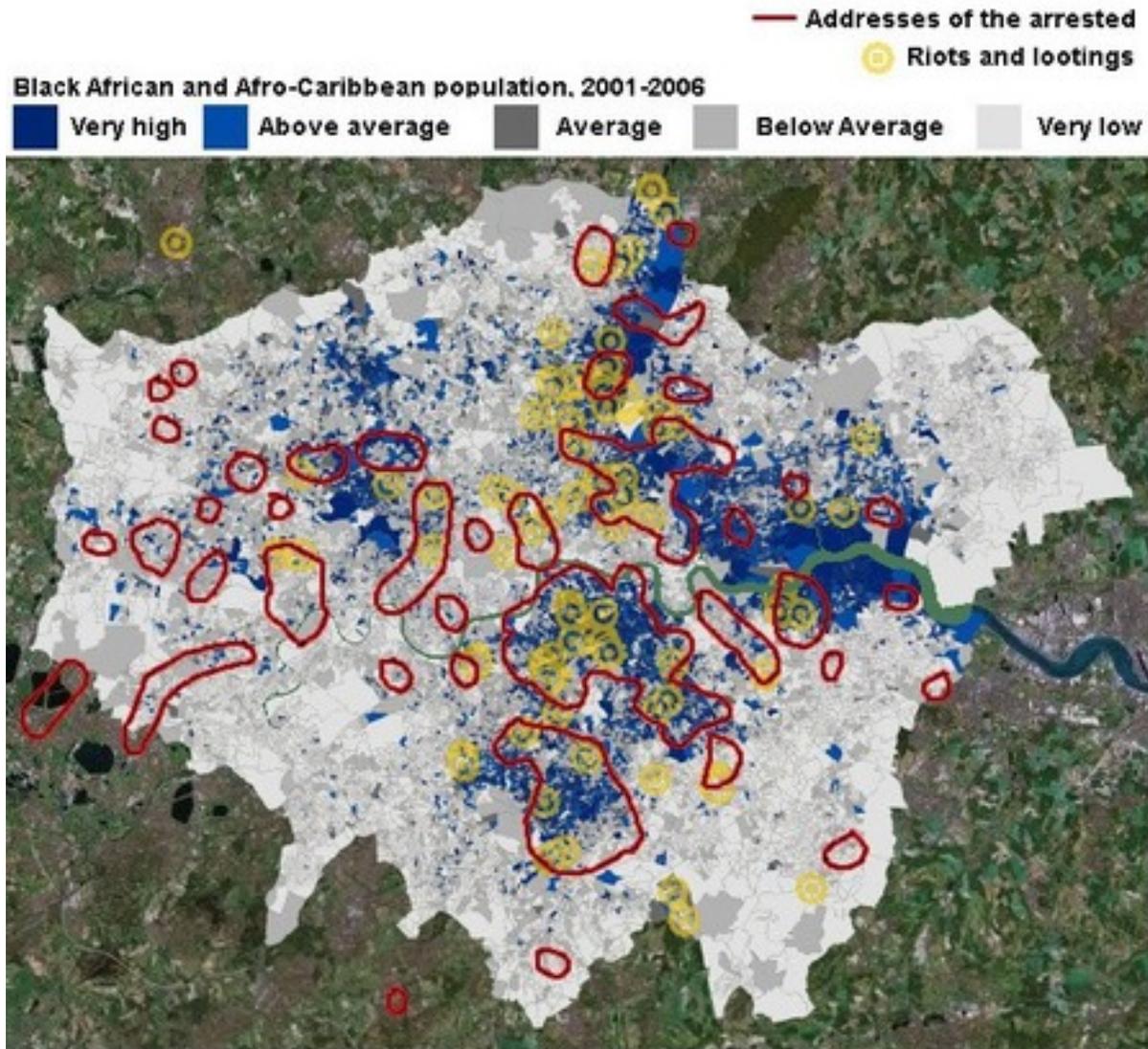


Figure 1. Redlining map of Philadelphia, 1937. Source: United States Federal Government/Wikimedia Commons.

A recent example of this practice can be seen in the maps issued by the police and media following the 2011 urban riots in Britain (see figure 2). Geolocating police statistics of arrests, the maps claimed to show that the riots were concentrated in areas with a large Black and ethnic minority population. However the fact is that the demographic profile of the mainly young rioters was multi-ethnic, and included a large number of white youth, girls as well as boys. However, the police concentrated their attention on Black male youth on the grounds that they were ‘congenital’ trouble makers and law breakers and involved in other criminal activity. So they were over-represented in arrests. Even if you were just standing around on the street watching other people loot shops or set fire to cars, if you were young, Black and male, you were twice as likely to get arrested. The police area maps simply underwrote the ‘blame BAME’ game that the Tory press was playing.²



This is not a call for racial discrimination, but a note on inaccurate media coverage.

Figure 2. Map showing a correlation between the addresses of the Black and Afro-Caribbean population and arrests made during and after the London riots in August 2011. Source: UCL.

A somewhat similar dialectic of racializing spatial identities/spatializing racial identities operates through the cognitive mappings generated by popular or common sense bio-politics. Here the reputational profiling of a neighbourhood or housing estate as, for instance, ‘Black’ or ‘Asian’, associates its physical fabric with certain moral characteristics (viz ‘rough’ or respectable, dangerous or safe) in a way that may bear little correlation with its actual demographic or culture. A so called ‘Black neighbourhood’ may in fact contain only a minority of people of African or Caribbean descent, but their presence is enough to get the area publicly recognised as such. Such false totalisations rest ultimately on a purification rule which also underwrites policies and practices of

ethnic cleansing: one is one too many. Once biopolitical constructs are mobilised, so that bodily surfaces and distinctive anatomical features become key markers of 'race' and are then transferred onto the surface and topographical features of maps, their 'all over' character means that everyone can be made to have skin in the numbers game. For example, there have been many cases in which the arrival of one Black family in a 'desirable' residential street is enough to 'Blacken' its reputation, negatively affect property values and set in motion the familiar process of white flight. Maps, whether official or unofficial, play a key role in articulating this process, as they do the reverse process of gentrification.

So how Black lives are mapped really does matter to their outcome and can make a big difference to race relations. But although it is easy to see how existing methods of critical cartography can be used to highlight quantitative indices of institutionalised discrimination, the inter-subjective dimensions of casual racism active in everyday encounters is much less easily and frequently represented in terms of their spatial dynamics. Charting racist incidents via geolocated oral testimonies, whilst a valuable exercise, does not really capture these dynamics. This requires the use of participatory community mapping methodologies. However, their application, for example as a platform for anti-racist education, has been developed only in a few pioneering efforts.³

Bringing the message home

These considerations were sparked off by two events over the summer, one political, and the other personal. Black Lives Matter in the Stix is an offshoot of the main organisation and concentrates its campaigning activities in rural areas, where BAME folk are still thin on the ground. In August, along with about a thousand others, I attended an event they organised linking two villages in the East of England.⁴

The event featured a poem by the novelist and poet A. L. Kennedy on the subject of white privilege. The poem set me thinking about the kinds of positional solidarity that can be legitimately adopted towards the struggles of people of colour by those, like myself, who have experienced other forms of racism (in my case, anti-Semitism), but who also, under present circumstances, enjoy a degree of privilege in so far as we are not constantly harassed on account of our physical appearance. It has not always been thus, of course. If you look at Victorian and Edwardian postcards you will find frequent caricatures of Jews featuring bent backs, large grasping hands and crooked noses, signifying duplicity, greed and general moral deformity.

At a personal level, I met Chris, an unemployed mixed race teenager.⁵ Chris replied to an advert I placed for someone to help me paint and do routine maintenance work on my sailing boat, a 25 foot Gaff Cutter which was on dry land due to the lockdown. He reminded me a lot of my adopted son Stephen, who died in 2017. He had the same wiry build, the same studied curiosity about things, the same wry sense of gallows humour and the same pleasure in getting on with a job and pride in doing it well. He also reminded me a bit of my mixed race grandson, who had dropped out of school at 16 and made a living as a drug pusher, living on the edge, but with family support that Chris did

not have. Having lost touch with Ricky, perhaps I hoped that by getting to know Chris I would learn something indirectly about my grandson's situation.

Chris had lost his job as a cinema attendant at the local Odeon due to the lockdown in March, but, for reasons we never quite fathomed, had not received his P45 and so could not claim unemployment benefit. He had been homeless and sofa surfing after he was thrown out of the family home by his mum following a series of rows. He was now housed in temporary accommodation by Peabody and waiting for something more permanent. He remained very involved with his family and many of the difficulties he had were directly or indirectly related to family crises. Chris recognised that he had some mental health issues but his main problems were to do with day to day survival hassles and his struggle to get enough money to buy food and basic necessities. Various support systems signally failed to provide any kind of safety net. In that sense his story is not unlike that of many thousands of young people who have been cast adrift by lockdown measures; but there are also some unique features to his story which complicate the picture and which bear on the chaotic interface between the oppressive reality of what it means to be young, Black and poor in Britain today and the singular way he re-imagined, and to some extent reinforced, his predicament even as he struggled to transcend it.



Figure 3. Chris working on the boat. Source: authors photo.

At the beginning things worked out smoothly enough. Chris travelled down to the boatyard once a week and started work on cleaning the decks and painting the hull for which he got paid £10 an hour, plus travelling expenses (Figure 3). He was very keen to learn about sailing and was fascinated by the chart plotter and other navigational equipment on board, being as he said, a bit of a techie, and hoping eventually for a career in IT. However on the third week he didn't show and sent no apology or explanation. Then a couple of days later I got the following text messages:⁶

Cheryl: Hi I hope I'm texting the right person Chris was meant to meet you today and I escorted him to [the] station, he started throwing up jus after we got there, he's collapsed to the floor and is unconscious. I'm currently waiting for an ambulance to show up for him but I can give you a call soon and explain in more detail what's happened.

Chris: Morning I'm so sorry about yesterday I don't even know what happened, I was feeling fine when I get there and then I don't really remember much, I hope you have a good day, I got some food from Aldi and it was past its sell by date so I got food poisoning.

We rearranged his next visit for a few days later to give him time to recover, but again he didn't turn up. The next day he contacted me and the following text conversation ensued:

Chris: Hey I'm so sorry about yesterday., I was in hospital I've only jus been discharged

Phil: What happened?

Chris: A lot happened on Friday evening/night and I ended up trying to take my life, they had to pump my stomach n keep me in fluids for 24hrs but they said I didn't cause too much damage n I'm still medically fit, jus don't feel the best rn

Phil: What happened to make you feel suicidal?

Chris: Jus my mental health played up really bad n I guess a couple of my triggers were set off to make me feel like that. Basically on Friday I had a call from my uncle telling me both my grandparents died, then my best friend topped himself within 20 min of that phone call n I jus started driving myself insane, lost my temper in the hostel so security said to leave for a walk n I did, where I ran into my step brother who had a massive go at me telling me I'm worthless n I'm better off dead

Phil: I am really sorry to hear about your troubles. That is a helluva lot to have to deal with all at once. Were you close to your grandparents?

Chris: They lived in Kenya but I was really close w them we used to video call a lot

Phil: Did the hospital not refer you to a counsellor for support?

Chris: They referred me to the crisis team. I've dealt with them multiple times but they dont really help. They put in place what they call an action plan n they never follow through with it. They told me to try relax n not stress myself. Suggested a course in Mindfulness or CBT but I tried that a while ago and it didn't really help.

Phil: Hmm you need to see someone for proper psychotherapy on a regular basis

Chris: Probably yea, but like part of it is to do with struggling to get on with basic life. Like I struggle to sort food most days. I've jus had enough of everything nowadays if honest.

Phil: Well you are in a difficult situation with no regular income and no permanent place of your own to call home. Try to deal with immediate issue like go get a food voucher organised so you can go to a food bank and have a decent meal. Cut the problems down to size and don't try to tackle them all at once so you don't feel overwhelmed

Chris: That's a very good idea, I'm mid walking to Aldi, then going to lidl to get a couple cheaper bits n then I'm off to eat

Phil: Good idea, just one step at a time

Chris: I slept horribly if honest, kept tossing and turning, waking up in the night n everything, I can meet on Wednesday

Phil: Well you are going through a difficult time so it's only to be expected. Valerian is a good bet to help calm you down and it's a natural herb and non addictive. I will give you some to try if I see you on Wednesday.

Although Chris did make one more trip to the boat to finish off the deck, our relationship became virtual and conducted through texting. I found myself increasingly in a mentoring role rather than an employer, advising him on how best to claim unemployment benefit and deal with various agencies. I wrote to Odeon on his behalf asking why they still had not sent him a P45 after nearly six months and this did produce a result. Some of his experiences brought back memories of my own youth, when I had been homeless and in quite a bad way psychologically. We also discovered that we shared some common ground in the violence we had both suffered at the hands of the police, in my case for being Jewish, a squatter and a hippy in the 1960's.

From talking to him, or rather from listening to him talk, I realised that even though Chris had left home a lot of his emotional life was still bound up with his family, as in this conversation:

Phil: Have you been in touch with your family at all recently?

Chris: I haven't spoken to my family recently, like i tried to call my mumzy to try sort food but she didn't answer, like as if she can't help her own child

Phil: Well she may be busy and has your brother to look after

Chris: I mean I hope that's the case as I feel unwanted.so, like its jus hard, she only cares when she needs me.

Phil: She probably cannot spare the money, feels bad about it and deals with it by attacking you for asking

Chris: She has the money to spare I know that for a fact she just hates me I guess

Phil: Hmm. well you have to let her know you also need her. When people are needy it is difficult for them to reciprocate

Chris: I do try to tell her but it's not like she actually listens to me, she jus brushes it off her shoulder

Phil: Well you need to let her know that you find her behaviour hurtful. She may have unrealistic expectations about you standing on your own feet just yet.

Chris: I have, we've had countless arguments because of it, like I literally jus got off the phone to her, she was screaming at me because I asked her for £10-20 so I could go n try do a food shop, she went crazy n hung up...anyway thank you for all the help, it means a lot, I'm gonna go get food n I'm planning to,

He kept asking me for 'subs' so he could buy food, because the vouchers hadn't come through. I probably made a mistake in agreeing, thinking at least initially that he would work this off, but also perhaps recognising that our relationship had already moved way beyond its initial contractual frame. What then transpired was that he sent me a series of increasingly desperate pleas for money to get him, or in one instance, his sister, out of various scrapes accompanied by often quite elaborate stories.

Here are three such:

Chris: Hello I hate to ask but I really need your help. I'm stuck in [a town] Ive been here all night.: I met a guy for car fun on Grindr and he just left me here.: I know your probably gonna think I'm stupid but it's because I ran out of food and I really didn't wanna have to ask you for help again...

Phil: Did the guy not give you any money for a train fare?

Chris: No he tried to force himself on me so I pushed him off, he threw me out the car, I tried to hop a train n got caught so I'm now stuck walking round [a town] like an idiot. Unable to get the train. the British Transport Police won't let me near the station so I'd have to get a bus and I've got no money. It will be the last time I'll need anything as I've got the sleeping pills, I barely have any food but ill be fine I'm more concerned about getting home.

-x-

Chris: I didn't want to ask you again for more money so I asked a friend of mine to bring me some food and they said they would take me to Maccies, they tried to sexually assault and stab me. I'm now stuck in [a town] with no money and no way of getting a train or bus back and I have no way of getting food either. I'm stuck in the cold and rain. I don't know why they tried to do that but I feel very uncomfortable and unsafe where I am currently. Its absolutely pouring with rain. I just don't know what to do. Its freezing and I am sat next to a little fish shop. I am sorry to ask you again but are you able to help. Its fine if you can't I'll

try to figure something out. I am sat here in tears Its cold and raining. I don't know what to do.

-x-

Chris: I actually don't know what to do at this point I've asked everyone. My sister went to London this morning for a job interview and the person that dropped her off just left her at the job interview with no money to get back. She gets paid on Monday and said she can pay whoever gives her the money to get home back then but she really needs to get home as it's really cold and she's hungry she's got no food. She's crying on the phone to me her phone is on 25%, I really didn't wanna ask and your the last person I have to ask is there anything you can do to help please? I'm really worried about her.

-x-

These accounts have one thing in common: they portray states of abjection and abandonment, of hopelessness and helplessness, associated with being homeless, and also being vulnerable and subject to attack. They can all too easily be read as sob stories designed to extract money. But they are cries for more than financial help. The issue of whether they are literally 'true', in the sense of accurate representations of events that actually happened, or whether they exaggerate the circumstances for dramatic effect, or indeed are pure fabrications or phantasies, is in principle undecidable, at least by me. And anyway it is beside the point. They are faithful articulations of this young man's existential predicament, of the fact that he finds himself constantly caught up in situations not of his own choosing or making, in which he is powerless to intervene to either extricate himself, or change the circumstances which propelled him into such a vulnerable position in the first place.

If we had to find a carto-graphic model of this predicament it would have to take the form of a labyrinth or maze in which was trapped, a territory to which no map can offer a reliable guide and where, whichever which way you turn you may find yourself going round in circles and likely to encounter some kind of monster. If you find yourself in such a space, you may be lucky enough to catch hold of an Ariadne's thread to help you find your way out, but it is not one to be found on a GPS.

Chris frequently told me he was 'getting there', when I asked him how he was getting on, though it was not initially clear where 'there' was for him. Certainly it meant getting his benefits and food vouchers sorted out, and he had plans to go to college to take an IT course. But he intimated several times that there was more to his quest than that. Then one day I asked him what he did to relax and chill out. His answer opened up a whole new dimension of his life world, a space where he could at last be himself and feel free. This is what he told me in a recorded interview ([link](#)).⁷

Chris's cognitive map thus operates along two very different axes. Along the horizontal axis the moves he makes are continually being cancelled, interrupted or deflected, sometimes by institutional roadblocks, sometimes by obstacles which are accidentally or deliberately put in his way by others, including members of his family. Then on the vertical axis he transforms lockdown city from a place of confinement into a zone of personal freedom and tranquillity through his activities as an urban

explorer. To focus on only one dimension of his life is either to reduce its meaning to a struggle against racism, or to the aleatory moments in which he rises, literally and metaphorically, above his situational predicaments. But these are two sides of the same story. In his interview Chris discusses the routine harassment he receives from the police as a young Black man, but he also refuses to be defined by it.

So if Black lives should matter to others, it is not as objects of philanthropic concern or ethnographic curiosity, nor as a focus of political virtue signalling but as an affirmation of how and why *any* attempt to reduce these lives to an essentialised single dimension defined by race is a travesty of their necessary human complication and richness. A radical anti-racist cartography worthy of the name is just one way, amongst many, of realising that emancipatory project.

Author

Phil Cohen is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of East London and a research director of Livingmaps Network. He is also the project co-ordinator of the Young Citizen's Atlas of London., a new initiative by the network.

Notes

¹ See H Winslow 'Mapping, race, ethnicity' in A Kobayeshi (ed) *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* Elsevier 2020

² See *Reading the Riots* eprint.lse.ac.uk and for a more grounded view David Lammy *Out of the Ashes*. Lammy is the Labour MP for Tottenham where the riots originated as a response to the police murder of Mark Duggan an important figure in the local Black criminal subculture. In the book Lammy described the riots as an exercise in 'nihilistic hedonism'. At first sight his comments seemed to underwrite the dominant view that the riots were the work of a 'feral' underclass. However as one of the few Black MPs in the British Parliament Lammy also recognised the historical and structural dimensions of racism that had produced the situation in which the social contract between the State and the local BAME community had been broken and as a result there was no policing by consent.

³ For example there is no application of participatory mapping methods to anti racist work in the otherwise exemplary collecting of counter-cartography to be found in *This is not an Atlas* (2018). Mapping has been a central aspect of my own anti-racist pedagogy and will feature in the *Young Citizen Atlas of London* which the Livingmaps Network is currently developing.

⁴ See a video of the event at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h31NuOPfGfQ&feature=emb_title&tab_channel=blminthetix).

⁵ 'Chris' is used as a pseudonym here. He was happy to be included in this article and wanted his story to be told to let people know what life was like for young people in his situation. Although his story, as it is included here, did not undergo any formal ethical process, every effort has been made by the author to tell the story in a way he was comfortable with.

⁶ These text messages are reproduced with permission. The names and other identifying details have been changed.

⁷ This interview is reproduced here with permission from Chris.

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