JOHN LENNON WITH MICHAEL X - INTERVIEW (HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=EtDu73_4QIc), FRAME GRAB.

The Fluidity of Black Radicalism in 1980s Britain

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British life in the postwar period was counted off in civil disturbances. While the term "riot" has a complicated position in both public discourse and in British legal tradition, it is possible to delineate a whole group of hesitations down to a set of facts. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed sporadic British uprisings, and in the 1970s these became more regular as police applied more and more pressure to the generations of immigrant populations that had poured into Britain over the previous three decades. In 1980, Bristol was on fire. In 1981, the populations of Brixton, Southall, Toxteth, and Liverpool were rising up. 1985 saw it all happening again, both in those places and in others.

The question that haunted the authorities during the riots and continues until this day is: why? At the bottom, what was the root cause of these riots? In their book *Uprising!*, published in the period between the 1981 and 1985 civil disturbances, leftist journalists Martin Kettle and Lucy Hodges point to the long history of British rioting for "powerless people" to "physically challenge the world that seemed to deny them what they wanted."[1]

The creation of a new British subjectivity in the immediate period after World War II cannot be understated, and the understanding of the collective "who" that rose up in the 1970s and 1980s is dependent on that factor. The postwar years saw the passing of the Nationality Act in 1948, which in no uncertain terms declared that "all citizens of independent commonwealth countries remained British."[2] Between 1948 and 1962, when the first of several immigration-limiting bills was passed, there was a massive influx of migrants to mainland Britain from across the empire. British citizens from India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean immigrated for a number of reasons, most significantly due to the perception that there was more work opportunity there for them. Alongside those work opportunities, which were both scarce and concentrated in the service and construction sectors, they also experienced racism and what they called the "colour bar," a concept which mirrors the American "color line."

These migrants faced systemic racism from a variety of personal and governmental sources. "Europeans only" signs were commonly posted outside rental apartments or homes, forcing a *de facto* ghettoization of the newly-immigrated that limited social mobility. Political party members ran on anti-immigration and anti-immigrant platforms. There were many incidents of singular violence against those immigrants as well as large events like the Notting Hill riot in 1958 where the black population was terrorized for days on end by white "teddy boys" with iron bars and petrol bombs.

The mass migration into mainland Britain in the 1950s and 1960s meant that a large portion of the black and Asian youth of the 1970s and 1980s were first-generation. When Black Audio Film Collective member David Lawson spoke about the influx of Caribbean immigrants at a *liquid blackness* retrospective on the Collective's work in the Fall of 2014, he characterized it as colonial peoples traveling to a place that they considered home. This was doubly literal for the first-generation youth. They were living in the unified colonial and cultural home country of their birth.

At the same time, they were also living in a country that was experiencing the worst recession since the prewar period. Inflation had steadily ticked up before drastically increasing at the close of the 1970s. Unemployment was the highest Britain had seen in decades. Police violence against communities of color showed no signs of slowing, and the overapplication of stoppages and arrests on "sus" (a version of criminal loitering) increased tension between those communities and an overzealous, implicitly racist police force.[3]

This gives us at least a sketch of an answer to the "who" in "who was uprising during the 1980s?" and allows us to begin to answer the original question of "why were these people rising up in violent response to their government and social situation?"

I am going to use the rest of this essay to dwell on this question because it provides us with the ability to think about elements of fluidity in black radicalism. As a term,

"black radicalism" evokes several different registers. One is that of the decolonization efforts, in concrete and written form, demonstrated so clearly by Frantz Fanon in his *Toward the African Revolution* and *Wretched of the Earth.* Another form is that embodied by various tactics employed during the American Civil Rights Movement: the community, service, and economic boycotts of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that have been folded under the long shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the early Black Power stances of Stokely Carmichael during his time with

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:
Michael X leaving a plane in the Black Audio Film Collective's *Who Needs A Heart?* (BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE, 1991), FRAME GRAB.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and after. Still another form is the black militarism embodied by the Fruit of Islam and then, later, the Black Panthers. Yet another is Fred Moten's sense of the black radical tradition, encompassing the black poetic and jazz traditions as ways of formulating a particular kind of politics that valorizes those modes of artistic creation as ways of understanding new forms of collective expression and action.[4] The jazz ensemble, for example, becomes a way of thinking through radicalism itself.

This network of black radicalism in all of its different forms points to a particular mode of *liquid blackness*. To speak of *liquid blackness* is, in part, to talk about the ways that blackness arranges itself in space as well as how it arranges space around itself. However, if that is true, then there are secondary functions of *liquid blackness*, and we must talk

about the *politics* of that liquidity and what it affords in terms of the ability for people of color to act in the world. What we can see in the case of black radicalism is a space in which the liquidity of blackness allows for a plurality of methods for addressing how blackness is marked onto the body. Fanon's description of being hailed as black in *Black Skin, White Masks* is the ur-moment of this formulation, illustrating how blackness constructs both the visual and the space the visual takes place in.

Black radicalism, then, can be seen as a container that *liquid blackness* both forms and is formed by. In order to explain this phenomenon, I will take a speculative historical approach and map the fluid radicalism of the past with contemporary developments in understanding the liquidity of blackness. While the latter might inevitably be tied up with current ways that capitalism and the visual arts have interweaved with one

another, it is perhaps fruitful to think backward in order to trace moments of fluidity that have set the conditions of possibility for our contemporary period.

I am going to dedicate the rest of this essay to two particular cases in which black radicalism's fluid structure played out in the history and context of the civil disturbances in 1970s and 1980s Britain. The first will be that of Michael X, his particular brand of black radicalism, and how it demonstrates the space-shaping qualities of *liquid blackness* in the context of the riots. The second will be an analysis of how the British political system understood the political uprisings and how the fluidity of radicalism generated a particular kind of response from the British political and policing establishment.

John L. Williams' *Michael X: A Life in Black and White* is an account of

"MICHAEL X CAPTURED THE ATTENTION OF A NATION THAT WAS BARRELING TOWARD A DECADE OF RACIAL VIOLENCE..."

the life of Michael De Freitas, who became well known as Michael X (and at the end of his life, Michael Abdul Malik). It is a story of a particular formation of militaristic black radicalism in the United Kingdom during the 1960s. An heir to the political goals of figures like Malcolm X, Michael X captured the attention of a nation that was barreling toward a decade of racial violence and rebellion. He first burst into the spotlight with the formation of the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS), which was an organization devoted to racial justice in Britain.

In and out of jail for various charges of public disturbance, Michael X understood that any developments in the political power of black people in Britain would have to be built on a stable structure. His answer came in the form of the Black House, a community and organizational center that existed to exclusively support black artists and community members. Lacking the grassroots funding base of organizations like the Nation of Islam, Michael X funded the Black House through "his preferred money-raising technique— exploiting white liberal guilt."[5]

It is precisely this white liberal guilt that makes Michael X's story as a criminal turned black power public figure salient for a discussion of the liquidity of black radicalism. Michael X was able to secure funding from celebrities like John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who committed ten thousand pounds to Michael X in order for him to write a book on "the Black Experience."[6] At the same time, he

(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:

HORACE OVÉ, *MICHAEL X* (*MICHAEL DEFREITAS; MICHAEL ABDUL MALIK*), 1966, COLOR PRINT.
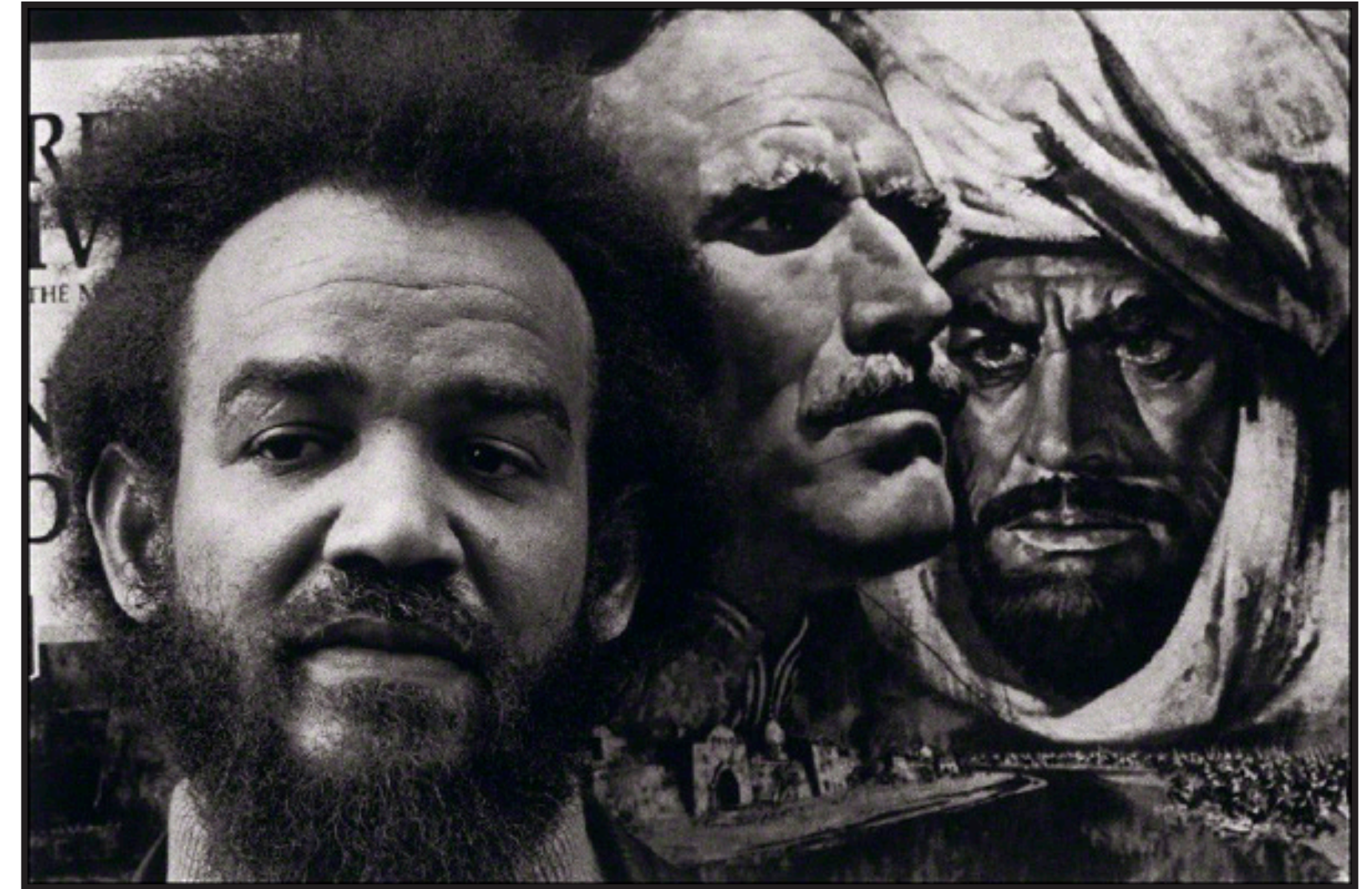
called for donations to the Black House by "upbraiding the white reader for taking an interest in black struggles abroad but ignoring what goes on the home front."[7] In these moments, he is invoking a black radicalism that reduces the complexity of the material, lived conditions of black people and turns it into a shapeless, liquid mass that flows through and stands in for the actual lived lives of those people. Michael X's white liberal audience, in their rush to find "black radicalism," can only find this amorphous, manipulatable mass that claims to represent a vast plurality of experiences that can never be reduced to a single entity.[8]

The period in which Michael X was most active, the late 1960s and early 1970s, "reflected the growth of a more radical, autonomist movement in black British politics," but current historical documents

make it apparent that the radical left in the United Kingdom grew disenchanted with American-style black radicalism as the 1970s went on.[9] The civil disturbances of the 1980s were not generated through a black radical dream of slogans and community solidarity, but instead through a response to increased pressure by policing agencies.[10]

The British riots of the early 1980s present a post-black power world in the sense that black power is not an abstracted specter existing rhetorically to secure concessions from intelligentsia of British society. Instead, it has become materially grounded within the crowds of black men and women literally exercising power to attack and expel militarized police from their communities. While these victories in 1980, 1981, and 1985 were never totalizing or permanent, it is a moment where the becoming-liquid, or becoming-abstracted, quality of blackness is thwarted by a

solidity in black communities allied with both themselves and others.

However, in the investigatory aftermath of these events, we can see a fluid black radicalism appearing again. Instead of the radical left evoking a malleable blackness for a tactical victory, this time it is the moderate right asserting that there must be a black radicalism at the heart of an uprising against the state apparatus that oppressed black people daily.

A reader of Kettle and Hodges' *Uprising!* will notice this specter of black radicalism. In the Sunday newspaper after the Brixton riots, Sir David McNee alleged that the riots were started by "troublemakers from elsewhere."[11] There were other hints that "white and black agitators came into the area once violence had broken out" but had not started the riots.[12] Later, during July's so-called copycat riots, "the hunt was
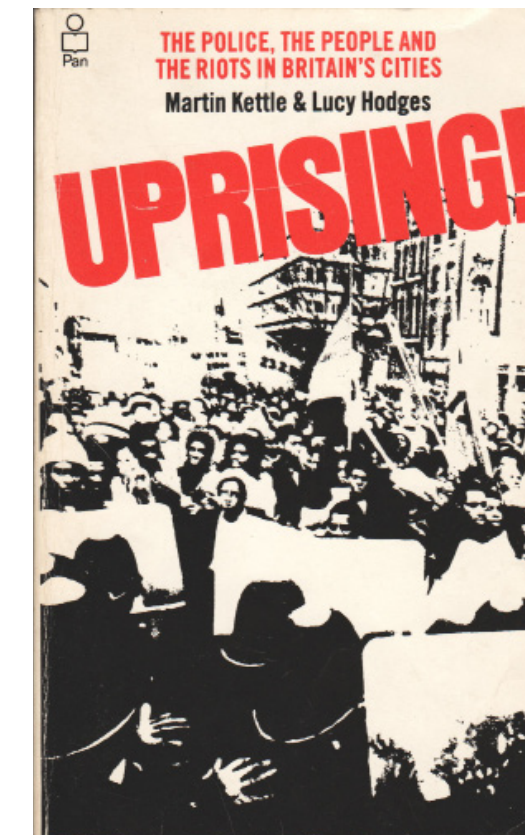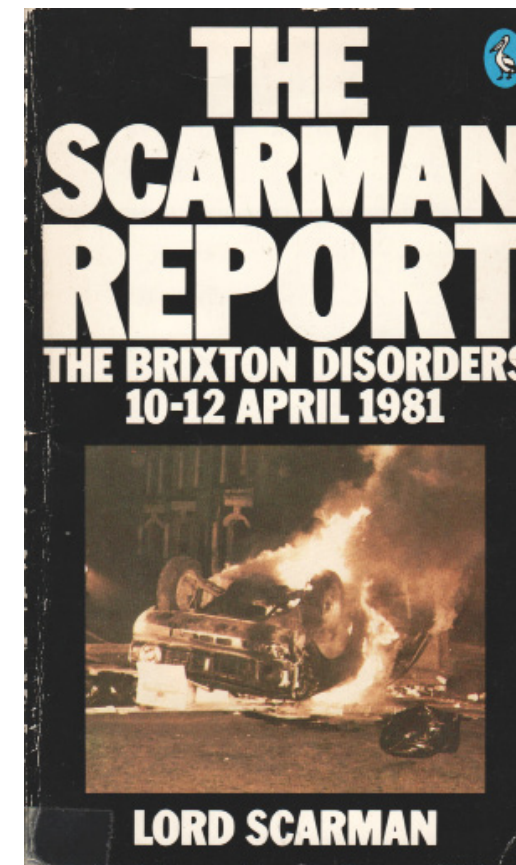
(LEFT) FIGURE 3:
The Scarman Report, the controversial published findings of the British government's official inquest.

(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:
Uprising!, a book written about the sociological conditions that caused the riots published in the early 1980s.

on immediately for outside political activists."[13] There were unconfirmed reports of Cockney and Scottish voices. The Labour Party Young Socialists handed out pamphlets, which drew concern around their involvement in the riots. There were hints of guerilla tactics being used by motorcycle gangs and "young men masked in balaclava helmets."[14]

The inquest into the Brixton riots led by Lord Scarman, producing the well-known *Scarman Report*, considered and dismissed these claims of outside influencers.[15] Despite raised concerns that there were American, white outsider, and Rastafarian direction and organization in the riots, none of these were substantiated. The civil uprisings were, from the facts that could be gathered, merely enacted by large groups of people deciding that they were not going to take it anymore rather than the machinations of organized politics. For some like Ronald Butt, a writer

for *The Times*, "the problem was 'well-educated activists' who are 'getting young blacks to believe they are victims of police oppression.'"[16]

This is the other side of the abstracted, fluidification of black radicalism. In this case, the Right is able to leverage fears about black radicalism into an outright moral panic about a strange, allied group of collaborators. Yet, just like Michael X, the conservative ideologues of authority understood that abstracting this radicalism away from any actual material manifestation of political action allows for a "justified" reactionary, conservative response to the situation. The fluidity allows for actual black organizations, figures, and regular people to be sublimated beneath reports of "grimly determined" young black men who seemed to initiate the riots in Brixton.[17] In the moment that the radicalism

rhetorically manifests as anything other than a symptom of a material condition, it becomes abstracted, moveable, and malleable like clay.

When black radicalism follows the pattern of *liquid blackness*, lifting and becoming abstracted from material conditions and into the realm of space-making sensorial politics, there is a danger that the abstracted blackness can become a totalizing, essentializing force. In these two examples, I have tried to show ways that black radical politics, in the time around the riotous period of the 1980s in the United Kingdom, have become fluidly radical. I have attempted to show that this moveable, flowing existence of blackness does not always beget a net positive. While the possibility of black radicalism to flow through groups ("Black is a state of mind," says the protagonist of *Who Needs A Heart?*) is sometimes

liberatory, embracing an excess that can evoke community and coalition, it can also be gathered and manipulated that much easier.

There is a danger in becoming *more than*, a double-sided political venture that cannot ever be fully brought into a wholly liberatory light. ∎

[1] Martin Kettle and Lucy Hodges, *Uprising! The Police, The People and The Riots in Britain's Cities* (London: Pan Books, 1982), 11.
[2] Ibid 41.
[3] Historical information on this time period in Britain can be found in Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!* and Brian D. Jacobs, *Black Politics and Urban Crisis in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[4] The term "black radical tradition" was coined in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).
[5] John L. Williams, *Michael X: A Life in Black and White* (London: Century, 2008), 170.
[6] Ibid 178
[7] Ibid 179
[8] This is not to suggest that the Black House was all smoke and mirrors to line Michael X's pockets. John Williams highlights Vince Hines and Herman Edwards as well as "a number of solid hard-working community-oriented black people" who worked on setting up and facilitating genuinely beneficial work at and in conjunction with the Black House.
[9] Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 49.
[10] Pamphlets and zines published by rioters are still, to me, the most interesting and salient documents that express the intentions of the rioters themselves. Of particular note is the booklet *We Want To Riot, Not To Work*.
[11] Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 114.
[12] Ibid, 115.
[13] Ibid, 161.
[14] This and the previous examples are all taken from Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 161–162.
[15] *The Scarman Report* contains several pages of evidence about outside influences on the Brixton riots, 73–78. Lord Scarman, *The Scarman Report* (London: Pelican Books, 1982).
[16] Butt is quoted in Kettle and Hodges, *Uprising!*, 187.
[17] Lord Scarman, *The Scarman Report*, 175.